

Discourse Markers Study of Non-English-Major Students at Postgraduate Level

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Abstract: There are many words and phrases in English which don't have any important meanings but they have many important functions, such as well, you know, I mean, right, however, still, in addition, uh/um, if, unless, yet and so on. Discourse markers are such a kind of common linguistic phenomenon, which contribute to the coherence of discourse in a text and contribute to the interaction in communicative activities. They also play many important roles of leading and restricting utterance interpretation. Discourse markers cannot form the semantic contents of utterances, but can provide information markers in utterance activities. Their functions are not partial but integral, which can effects the development and understanding of utterances. Discourse markers have dynamic pragmatic characters.

1. Introduction

Discourse markers, as the name implies, are markers of discourse-level. Although some words of discourse markers can take effects on the grammar-level such as but, then and however, these words or phrases also can play parts in discourse-level. Then we can see that discourse markers are the concept of discourse-circle, not the concept of grammar-circle. Discourse is the actual language being used, which called semantic units, units of language operation or units of language using by Halliday (1976), while the researchers of discourse markers generally regard the discourse as a language section of supra-sentential. Everyone has his point of view to what are discourse markers. Roughly speaking, discourse markers haven't a great influence on semantic of utterance, but can represent discourse structures. What kind of words or phrases can be regarded as discourse markers is determined by their definitions. There are many words and phrases are viewed as discourse markers such as and, but, or, so, because, then, now, therefore, well, however, anyway, oh, you know and I mean, while many scholars consider that I suppose, to tell the truth, talking about and I'm afraid are also discourse markers. And Schiffrin focus on the study of the above eleven discourse markers.

The study of discourse markers cannot be separated from the study of discourses. As a subject, discourse study is generally called discourse analysis and text linguistics, while it is also called discourse studies in continental Europe. "hua yu fen xi" is usually called by home scholars, and later it is called "yu pian fen xi", while it is still called "hua yu fen xi" in analysis of spoken language. Discourse analysis is a new-rising subject which dated from the 1950s. With the diversion of linguistics studies which shifted from sentence to discourse, discourse analysis have become a wide ranging research field involving philosophy and many social scientific subjects. Discourse analysis comprises genre analysis, discourse structure, discourse interpretation, discourse cohesion, discourse coherence, discourse propulsion mode and information process. Now that discourse is the language which is using, the analysis of discourse must relate some kind of language theories or grammar theories of language system or description of language system, otherwise it cannot to be called discourse analysis. Therefore, theoretical foundation and theoretical framework of discourse analysis are critical. Discourse analysis must contact the context which the discourse situates, which includes context of situation, context of situation and context of situation. The analysis of cognition, social and language of discourse can be concentrated, as well as the cross-disciplinary.

2. The Research Purpose of this Study

Within the field of second language pragmatics, the study of discourse markers has proved fruitful in understanding differences in the ways that native speakers and language learners use conversational language. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that not only do discourse markers (DMs) perform essential and nuanced functions in speech, but non-English-major students very often do not use these pragmatic markers in the same way that native speakers do. Due to the relationally important functions of DMs, their underuse or misuse in conversation can lead to semantic or pragmatic misunderstandings, which can in turn have negative consequences for non-native speakers who do not use these markers in expected ways. The continued study of non-English-major postgraduates' learning and use of discourse markers, therefore, has important implications for helping language learners to communicate effectively in daily life.

While a good deal of research has been conducted on DMs use in native speech and even English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, surprisingly little research has been aimed at the development of discourse marker competence in one important group: non-English-major postgraduates.

3. Findings

This part will make a detailed description to the several aspects in the following.

Firstly, according to the return visit researchers find that the non-English-major postgraduates' curiosity and interest to English is gradually growing with age. Most of the students think that listening is the most important part in the process of learning English, and then everybody has his own ideas in order of importance about the other items such as speaking, reading, writing and translating in the process of learning English. Their central driving forces of learning English mainly consist of dealing with the College English Test, coping with postgraduate entrance examination, personal interests, getting a job after graduation and many other driving forces such as in order to write papers. And most of the students don't have notebooks which can specially record the mistakes. The non-English-major postgraduates always pay attention to the collocations but a few of them cannot apply the collocation to oral English, because they think that they don't have the environment to use them. Though they cannot use the collocation very proficiently, most of the students point out that they often use the collocation because they pay attention to use it in daily life. In English class their activity of communicating in English is not so good because some students cannot remember the words they want to say, some students dare not say anything for being afraid of making mistakes and they think that they always don't have the environment to communicate in English.

Secondly, when talking about the classroom teaching, we may think of the class size in English class, which is a very important factor in English teaching. Everyone has his opinion about how many students in an oral English class is the suitable size. For most students the answer is that the suitable size should be below 20 students in an oral English class, because if the class size is too large the teacher cannot give everyone great instructions. About half of the students believe that it is not necessary to group the students by their different levels because it is too much trouble and is too ideal to enforce. Meanwhile, half of the students believe that it is necessary to group the students by their different levels, and the grouping schemes are different.

Thirdly, the teacher doesn't always point out the mistakes in the using of discourse markers in class. Fourthly, the non-English-postgraduates' impetus of studying English is weakening after taking part in the postgraduate entrance exams, the English knowledge can be forgotten because they seldom use English in their major. Fifthly, nearly half of the students don't believe that the topics in the books are increasingly hard to manage. So there is no direct connection between the textbook and the non-English-major postgraduates' using discourse markers.

4. Conclusion

This study on the use of discourse markers has many pedagogical implications for the teaching

of English. Many researchers have pointed out that pedagogical strategies may be a source of students' errors. The present study based on two corpora enables us to see the differences in the use of discourse markers between Chinese non-English-major postgraduates and English native speakers and then the problems with the use of discourse markers in non-English-major postgraduates' oral English is known to us. If non-English-major postgraduates' oral English could be improved by instructions on the use of discourse markers, then how and to what extent instructions on them should be given becomes one of the English teachers' great concerns in classroom oral English teaching. The implications might exist in aspects such as these tentatively shown in the following:

In class the English teachers should pay more attention to the explanation of discourse markers to students, the teacher should arouse the students to realize the importance of discourse markers and let the students pay attention to the use of discourse markers, especially the correct and reasonable use of them. But the teachers should avoid overstressing the value of discourse markers while raising students' awareness of applying discourse markers and need to ensure that students do not go to extremes, using discourse markers excessively and willfully without a full consideration of the appropriateness and accuracy. And the textbooks and handbooks should advise students to pay special attention to discourse markers in order to achieve clarity and coherence in oral English, without which the students will don't know how often they should use each of these words to be able to approximate native English. Through the analyses, it has been found that Chinese English learner often produce awkward and bookish utterance compared with the native speakers, which indicates the non-English-major postgraduates' pragmatic fossilization. The research has been proposed that formal instruction is quite necessary for students to acquire discourse markers and should be introduced into their oral class.

Although the corpus-driven approach employed in this study is objective to investigate the dynamic pragmatic use of discourse markers by Chinese non-English-major postgraduates. However, there are some limitations of the study the author have to admit of the study the author have to admit, and these limitations give some suggestions to the future research. Firstly, though the study is systematic and based on the specific context, it is still confined to a certain scope. And some individual factors on the use of discourse markers, such as gender and English learning background, are not considered. Secondly, to get a more comprehensive picture of discourse markers used by learner groups, data from natural communication is desirable. It might be challenged that in the present study the corpus of non-English-major postgraduates is too small. It is quite difficult to carry out more field recordings of spoken language and to process and analyze more data because of the pressure of research time and the limitation of various conditions. Finally, there is still much left to be done as to get more details about their respective features in this regard, the paper only made nine case studies to probe into the features of functional uses of discourse markers by non-English-major postgraduates and English native speakers. And in the study we only focus on the overuse, underuse or nonuse discourse markers but don't pay attention to the misuse of the discourse markers.

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