

## Use of Discourse Markers in Writing and Answering Essay Questions among Undergraduates in Ondo State University of Science and Technology, Okitipupa, Nigeria

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**Abstract.** The study examined the students' level of mastery of discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions. It also determined the likely barriers to effective use of discourse markers and established the different strategies in teaching discourse markers (DMs). This was to promote effective learning of discourse markers and their correct use in writing and answering essay questions. The study adopted the survey research design. The population consisted of all the undergraduate students of Ondo State University of Science and Technology, Okitipupa. An intact sampling technique was employed in selecting all first semester Part 1 students of 2013/2014 academic session comprising 265 students across all the four Departments in the Faculty of Science of the University. An instrument tagged: "GST 101 Examination Question" was developed by the investigator. This consisted of four sections of different items which were used to collect data from the respondents. Two research questions and two hypotheses emanated from the study. Data collected were analysed using frequency count, simple percentage, and ANCOVA. The findings among others, showed that 141(53.2%) of the respondents had low understanding of discourse markers such as: in addition, followed by linkers showing relationship with 137(51.2%). The results further showed that 231(87.2%), representing majority of the respondents were of the view that lack of mastery of the various connectors is a major barrier to effective writing and answering of essay questions. The results also affirmed that there is significant difference in students' academic performance in using discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions across different Departments ( $F=11.345$   $p<0.05$ ). The study concluded that students need to be properly taught to master the various discourse markers for effective writing and answering essay questions.

**Keywords:** Discourse Markers(DMs); writing; essay questions; students' performance.

## Introduction

English is a medium of disseminating information and knowledge in various forms in any academic environment. According to Adegbite (1995), the mastery of English is important for the individual Nigerian learner in his own social advancement and the socio-political economic growth of the nation. To operate effectively, the learner is expected to master the fundamental skills of the language. Alo (1995) has indicated that, a pre-requisite for academic success is a good command of basic communicative skills in the language of education. This is because learners are exposed to various situations, challenges and occasions where they have to communicate their ideas in written forms during examinations, assignments, seminars, tests or presentations. In Use of English lessons, students are given opportunities to answer comprehension questions, summarise passages, present ideas logically and write essays on different areas. Discourse markers (DMs) are like building blocks that join varieties of words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs together to give the central idea the desired meaning. They relate to a progressive ordering of information from a starting point to the end of the discussion. In fact, Lam (2009, in Vickov and Jakupcevic 2017) indicates that, DMs facilitate the process of interpretation and social involvement in spoken interaction, and are essential to the maintenance of conversational cooperation, ensuring that interactions go on smoothly.

In writing and answering essay questions, every writer must utilize discourse markers to develop the essay or discussion so that the thought pattern will flow from a supporting idea to several dependent components. Students should therefore be adequately informed of the use of discourse markers for writing and speaking purposes. The thorough knowledge of the numerous discourse markers will assist learners to present their points logically and systematically. Adesanoye (1994) opines that the problem of grammar in undergraduates' English has remained a perennial phenomenon. Some scripts of university students in essay, comprehension, summary and letter writing questions reveal inability to use discourse markers correctly and judiciously. Invariably, this lack of proficiency in using discourse markers hampers the free flow of thought and discussions. Alo (1995) further indicates that poor organization of materials and irrelevant introductions constitute most students' examination answer scripts and projects. This calls for learners to enrich their stock of words through constant reading and mastery of how linkers are used. This can be actualized by the teachers' use of appropriate strategies in teaching discourse markers.

Various strategies such as the communicative approach, the task-based method and the natural approach can be utilized to teach discourse markers to assist learners to acquire the content and improve their knowledge of them. In using these strategies, learners are opportune to think and use discourse markers in real-life situations. They are to classify them to carry out meaningful tasks. According to Walsh (2006), discourse markers can be used by teachers to begin a lesson and end the teaching stages. This enables the students to understand both the content and the patterns of interaction. Othman (2010) also points out that DMs assist in the establishment of interpersonal relationships during classroom discussion, providing a better environment for students' involvement.

The connecting words, discourse markers and phrases used between and within sentences and paragraphs are transition indicators. They give the paragraphs coherence and indicate appropriate writing skills. They enable the reader of passages, thesis, and write-up to decode the sequence of ideas, additional facts, contrast of ideas and illustrations. The connection of ideas from one paragraph to the other in a sequential form is distorted if discourse markers are not used correctly. Fraser (1999) explains discourse markers as a class of lexical expressions drawn primarily from the syntactic classes of conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases. They connect two or more separate sentences or ideas; but the semantic relationship will determine the connectors to use. They may show relationship of cause and effect, addition, contrast, transition, sequence, enumeration and numerous other relationships during discussions, writing and answering of essay questions. Words and sentences are not just placed together, rather, they are used according to what the writer wants to impart or express.

According to Aremo (2004), various linguistic devices are used to make it really clear that sentences occurring together are connected in meaning. Since the range of linking words available in the knowledge of the learners will determine how effectively they are used, it is of paramount importance that learners are informed of the different linking words. Repetition is used to show the link between sentences in writing. Quirk and Greenbaum (2000) indicate that lexical equivalence is through the repetition of words and phrases. In the example; it is good to be disciplined. Discipline is a virtue that every individual is expected to possess. An individual who is undisciplined will not be respected. There is the repetition of words such as 'discipline' and 'individual'. Words that are synonymous to these two words such as 'self-control' and 'person' respectively can be used to avoid repetition. Most learners do not have adequate knowledge of vocabulary concept like synonyms and this affects their ability to express themselves clearly and coherently. The ability to join together different ideas in various ways is an essential skill in effective writing. Moreover, the skill to use different words interchangeably correctly enhances convincing and impressive discourse. The choice as to when and how to connect ideas together is done naturally by skilful writers.

Moreover, lexical link between sentences may include antonyms. Antonyms are used to indicate opposite or contrast. In the sentence, men are usually referred to as being energetic while women are termed the weaker vessel. Here, 'men' is the opposite of 'women' while 'energetic' is the opposite of 'weaker'. This indicates that, in writing, every writer develops certain approaches to expressing ideas or points of views. These methods relate to the flow of thought in the process of discourse. The thought processes will determine the type of writing to be involved in or the topic to be tackled. To this end, this study examines the relevance of discourse markers and their semantic relationship in discourse and writing. It further indicates how students can effectively overcome the barriers to proper use of discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions as well as the strategies teachers can use to teach them.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Many researchers have discussed extensively on the use of discourse markers in speech, conversation, interactions and write-up in various journals and articles (Lam, 2009; Othman, 2010 and Yang, 2011). However, this study adopts the framework of Relevance Theory (RT). According to Carston (2012), the Relevance Theory begins with a general view of human cognitive processing of what motivates us to attend to certain information sources, but not others. This indicates the necessity for learners to reason logically, decode important facts and discard the non-essential, thereby making use of appropriate linkers to make their communication or write-up meaningful.

Sperber and Wilson (1995, in Saeed 2006) affirm that a more radical development of Grice's maxims is Relevance Theory. The approach tries to bring the Gricean cooperative and conversational maxims especially the principle of relevance which states that 'Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance' into cognizance. It is this principle that enables the hearers to decode the speaker's communicative purpose. Blakemore (2001) further states that an utterance that is established with the principle of relevance is based on the hearer's recognition that it is an act of ostensive communication - which is, an act of intentional communication by which the speaker is not only interested in sending a particular message but is actively assisting the hearer understand this. He captures it vividly that, relevance is defined in terms of contextual effect and processing effort. Contextual effects are the ways in which a new piece of information may interact with contextual assumptions to yield an improvement to the hearer's overall representation of the world. The processing effort according to him is the linguistic complexity of the utterance, the accessing as well as the use of contextual assumptions in the derivation of contextual effects.

Discourse markers when used appropriately in written and verbal contexts make thought flow coherent and concise. No divergent points of view will end on the same note. The extent to which a context is interpreted will be determined by how it is internalized. This will eventually dictates its utilization through various mode of discourse.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Poor academic performance has been recognised as a reoccurring problem in the educational system across all disciplines of which English Language is most prominent. Previous studies limited their findings to primary and secondary school levels. However, the fact that students gained admission to higher institution of learning does not really guarantee their excellent performance in the Use of English. Since Use of English is a compulsory course for all new students in higher institutions of learning in Nigeria, it is also a means of connecting and disseminating information in other disciplines. The students are expected to have in-depth knowledge of discourse markers so that they can conveniently connect their ideas and points together harmoniously when writing. The investigator deems it fit to examine how the learning of discourse

markers could promote effective writing and answering of essay questions in Use of English and other disciplines, hence, this study considers the various ways this could be achieved.

### **Objectives**

The study assessed the use of discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions among undergraduates in Ondo State University of Science and Technology. The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. determine students' level of understanding of discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions;
2. examine the likely barriers to effective use of discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions;
3. investigate the effectiveness of different strategies of teaching discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions;
4. find out the differences in performance of students in using discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions.

### **Research Questions**

Based on the objectives of this study, the following research questions were asked:

1. What is the students' level of understanding of discourse markers in writing and answering of essay questions?
2. What are the barriers to effective use of discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions?

### **Hypotheses**

The following research hypotheses were generated and tested on the basis of the objectives of the research:

1. There is no significant difference in the effectiveness of the various strategies used in teaching and learning discourse markers.
2. There is no significant difference in students' performance in writing across different Departments.

### **Methodology**

The study employed descriptive survey research design. The population of the study comprised all the undergraduates' students of Ondo State University of Science and Technology, Okitipupa. An intact sampling technique was employed in selecting all Part 1 students of 2013/2014 academic session comprising 265 students across the four Departments in the University. These include: Biological Sciences (79), Chemical Sciences (54), Physical Sciences (72)

and Mathematical Sciences (60). An examination question titled: "Use of English GST 101 (UEG)" which consisted of four sections of different items was used to collect data from the respondents. Section A was made up of a comprehension passage in which the respondents were expected to read the passage carefully and answer the questions that follow. The questions were made of 10 items of 20 marks. Section B was on essay writing in which the respondents were expected to write an essay on "New Technologies in the Library" paying close attention to the principles of unity, coherence, originality and mechanical accuracy, also of 20 marks. Section C was on communication skills in which respondents were expected to define communication and discuss five barriers to effective communication. It was 10 marks. Section D was on Punctuation Marks where respondents were expected to punctuate sentences. They were expected to explain the following: (a) Comma (b) Full Stop (c) Question Mark (d) Colon (e) dash and (f) hyphen. It was also 20 marks.

The investigator taught all the respondents the course for the first semester of 2013/2014 academic session and used different strategies such as: Lecture Learning Strategy (LLS), Demonstration Learning Strategy (DLS), Active Learning Strategy (ALS), Problem - based Learning Strategy (PLS), and Work-based Learning Strategy (WLS) in disseminating facts and ideas on the course. It was at the end of the semester that UEG was administered to the respondents. The instrument was subjected to validity before use. The instrument was duly validated with a reliability coefficient of 0.78. The data were analysed using frequency counts, simple percentage and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA).

## **Results**

In this study, the results of the data collected are analysed and presented on the basis of research questions gathered and hypotheses tested. Inferences are made from the results obtained from the research questions and the research hypotheses as indicated below:

### **Research Question 1**

#### **What is the students' level of understanding of discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions?**

In order to answer this research question, data collected on students' academic performance within the study area were subjected to descriptive statistics to determine students' level of understanding of discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions.

**Table1.** Descriptive statistics of students' level of understanding of discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions

Discourse Markers Level	Low	Moderate	High	Remarks
	f(%)	f(%)	f(%)	
Conjunctions	133(50.2)	89(33.6)	43(16.2)	Low
Repetition for emphasis	97(36.6)	132(49.8)	36(13.6)	Moderate
Linkers showing relationship	137(51.7)	100(37.7)	28(10.6)	Low
Synonyms	141(53.2)	91(34.3)	33(12.5)	Low
Antonyms	99(37.4)	116(43.8)	50(18.9)	Moderate

Results in Table 1 showed the students' level of understanding of discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions. It can be deduced from the Table that 133(50.2%); 137(51.7%) and 141(53.2%) of the respondents had low comprehension of discourse markers such as conjunctions, linkers showing relationship and synonyms respectively. Their inability to grasp the discourse markers and utilise them in organising their thought flow effectively affect their writing and answering of essay questions. This indicates that the rates of students who do not comprehend the teaching of discourse markers are high. This in a way reflects the carry-over of their deficiency in mastering the rudiments of English language in their secondary schools. If the students have captured and master some of these concepts in their previous school years, they would be able to relate the knowledge acquired to the present learning experience.

**Research Question Two: What are the barriers to effective use of discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions?**

In order to answer this research question, data collected on the barriers to effective use of discourse markers were subjected to descriptive statistics and the results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of the barriers to effective use of discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions

Barriers	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Poor mastery of the rudiments of English	149	56.2
Lack of mastery of discourse markers	231	87.2
Inability to write effectively using discourse markers	223	84.2
Inability to maintain logical sequences in written text	194	73.2
Negative attitude to learning English	157	59.3

The results in Table 2 showed the barriers to effective use of discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions. It can be observed from the table that 231(87.2%) representing majority of the respondents indicated the lack of mastery of the various discourse markers as a barrier to writing and answering essay questions. 223(84.2%) of the respondents viewed inability to write effectively as a result of handy knowledge of discourse markers as another barrier. 194(73.2%) indicated inability to maintain logical sequences in written text as a barrier. 157(59.3%) attributed the barrier to negative pre-conceived attitude to learning English while 149(56.2%) stated poor mastery of the rudiments of English. These point out that while these impediments highlighted are there, the students may not be able to use discourse markers correctly in different situations and experiences. If these problems continue, it will affect their performances in other areas and disciplines.

**Hypothesis One:** There is no significant difference in the effectiveness of using different strategies in teaching discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions.

To test this hypothesis, data collected on different strategies adopted (Lecture Learning Strategy= LLS, Demonstration Learning Strategy= DLS, Active Learning Strategy= ALS, Problem-based Learning Strategy= PLS and Work-based Learning Strategy= WLS) in teaching discourse markers in writing, for answering essay questions and students performances were subjected to Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) to determine the possible difference in the effectiveness of the strategies.

**Table 3.** Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) of the effectiveness of different strategies in teaching discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions

Source	Type III Sum	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta of Square
Corrected model	10200.264	4	2550.066	18.454	.000	.221
Intercept	516566.038	1	516566.038	3738.263	.000	.935
Strategies	10200.264	4	2550.066	18.454	.000	.221
Error	35927.698	260	138.183			
Total	562694.000	265				
Corrected Total	46127.962	264				

**R Squared = .221 (Adjusted R Squared = .209)**

The results in Table 3 showed that there is significant difference in using different strategies in teaching discourse markers within the study area at ( $F = 18.454$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, the null hypothesis that states that there is no significant difference in using different strategies in teaching discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions is hereby rejected.



**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics of the effectiveness of using different strategies in teaching discourse markers

Strategies	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
LLS	38.7708	12.32061	48
DLS	41.2759	10.48272	58
ALS	41.2381	10.00197	42
PLS	43.0952	13.52741	63
WLS	55.5185	12.29318	54
<b>Total</b>	<b>44.1509</b>	<b>13.21844</b>	<b>265</b>

The results in table 4 showed that students that were taught with Work-based Learning Strategy (WLS) performed better than their colleagues taught with other strategies considering the highest mean score of ( $\bar{x}$ = 55.5185).

**Hypothesis Two:** There is no significant difference in students' performance in using discourse markers in writing and answering essay questions across different Departments.

To test this hypothesis, data collected on students' academic performance in the Use of English (GST 101) based on Departments (Biological Sciences = BS, Chemical Sciences = CS, Physical Sciences = PS and Mathematical Sciences = MS) were subjected to Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) to determine possible difference in students' performance in various Departments.

**Table 5.** Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of the difference in students' performance in writing and answering of essay questions in the Use of English across different Departments

Source	Type III Sum	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta of Square
Corrected Model	5321.158a	3.000	1773.719	11.345	0.000	0.115
Intercept	496747.700	1.000	496747.700	3177.194	0.000	0.924
Departments	5321.158	3.000	1773.719	11.345	0.000	0.115
Error	40806.804	261.000	156.348			
Total	562694.000	265.000				
Corrected Total	46127.962	264.000				

R Squared = .115 (Adjusted R Squared = .105)

The results in Table 5 indicated that there is significant difference in students' academic performance in the Use of English (GST 101) across different Departments within the study area at ( $F = 11.345$ ;  $P < 0.05$ ). There is no significant difference in students' academic performance in the Use of English (GST 101) across different Departments, thus the null hypothesis is rejected.

**Table 6.** Descriptive statistics of the difference in students' performance in the Use of English across different Departments

<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>N</b>
BS	43.6709	13.65671	79
CS	41.3889	10.73597	54
PS	50.9722	12.88298	72
MS	39.0833	11.90825	60
<b>Total</b>	<b>44.1509</b>	<b>13.21844</b>	<b>265</b>

The results in Table 6 indicated that students in the Department of Physical Science had better scores than their colleagues in other Departments considering the highest mean score of ( $\bar{x} = 50.9722$ ).

### **Discussion**

The results indicated that students have a low comprehension of the discourse markers. Thus, the discourse markers they use in writing and answering essay questions are scanty and monotonous. Coordinating conjunctions like 'and', 'or', 'but' are frequently used in their writing and in most cases they use them wrongly. The findings corroborate Khatib (2010) who indicated that students had problem comprehending parts of reading texts when they did not know the meanings and functions of DMs. This shows that a thorough understanding of the DMs will assist students to write and answer questions efficiently. Innajih (2007) adds that explicit instruction of DMs is to the advantage of second language learners and it enhances their reading comprehension significantly. Teaching of discourse markers seems to influence all language skills since they are important components of language. Sloan (1986, in Khatib 2010) pointed out that due to the lack of the knowledge of discourse analysis and discourse markers, learners of English have got into the habit of decoding a paper word by word, rather than extracting the information out of the paper through comprehending the discourse devices.

Discourse markers link words, phrases and sentences together. Lack of mastery of these connectors hinders effective writing and answering of essay questions. Anburaj and Christopher (2015) opine that most students have a carefree attitude towards learning English. When compared to science subjects, English is given far less priority by the students. This attitude affects their learning and using of discourse markers. Numerous researchers have investigated DMs across different languages and their applications in various contexts (Schiffrin, 2003). According to Dalle and Inglis (1990) DMs play an important function for students to have a better understanding of the teacher's language, which in return helps them to improve learning efficiency. DMs have greatly assisted learners to reduce the problem of writing effectively and in the areas of communication.

The findings supported that of Dalle and Inglis (1990), Fung and Carter (2007) and Grant (2010) who opined that DMs are significant signposts in teacher's spoken discourse for pedagogical clarification and effective interaction. They perform both social and educational function in classroom discourse. Hellermann and Vergun (2007) denote that DMs are not frequently taught in the classrooms but acquired outside the classrooms. There is a need to integrate and involve teachers in training programmes to improve their pedagogical interaction so as to assist students to write efficiently using the various discourse markers. Ajimer (2009) elucidates that most language teachers are reluctant to accept that learners of English should actually be taught forms and structures of spoken English such as discourse markers.

Performance of students in using discourse markers effectively in writing and answering essay questions differ across departments. Some students express their ideas and points using discourse markers minimally while others mixed up their points without using them. This makes their write up and answers to essay, comprehension, summary and grammar disjointed and incoherent. Othman (2010) states that DMs are indispensable conversational devices that contributes to the meta-discourse of lecturers' speech. They are crucial in assisting students to communicate effectively as well as write efficiently in any given situation. DMs are used to encode the communicative intentions of speakers (e.g. attitudes, feelings and stances) and the involvement of listener (Brinton, 1996; Schiffrin, 1987). This implies that students must have adequate knowledge of discourse markers for better performance.

The result of the findings further revealed that there is significant difference in using different strategies in teaching discourse markers within the study area. This shows that functional teaching strategies that will enhance students' understanding of discourse markers must be utilized. Most times, teachers of English as a second language (ESL) concentrate on the teaching of basic writing skills such as pre-writing activities (brainstorming and outlining), writing stage (drafting), rewriting (rewriting and editing), as well as structuring the essay (introduction, body and conclusion) while paying little or no attention on discourse markers as linguistic devices that make ideas in discourse hang together. Teachers of English Language (ESL) should therefore expose the students to the various discourse markers and their functions. As a result of the increase in the number of students offering Use of English, the method of assessing them through essay questions has been modified to objective questions. Though this has minimised the stress of marking many scripts of different question types, the method has actually prevented students from coherent and cohesive writings. Albeshar and Farid (2017) posit that the university administration must change their policy for students writing examination, and instead of binding the students to memorize a few structures and limited DMs to use in short paragraphs, they should devise such a policy which helps assess the students as discourse creators in their writing.

## Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- DMs are multi-functional and students should use them at different levels of discourse.
- Students should be given opportunities to interact meaningfully during lectures using different forms of discourse markers.
- Lecturers should recognize the importance of various cohesive devices during class interactions and assist the students to utilize them for interactional competence.
- Discourse markers should be included in the English language curriculum and taught as a separate topic.
- Different teaching methods should be used for students to use DMs.
- Students must be positively disposed to overcoming any barrier to grasping the different discourse markers and be ready to use them for broader experiences when the situation arises.
- Avenue should be provided for students to discuss, write, ask and answer questions on a wide range of subject matters, possibilities and topics using DMs.

## Conclusion

It has been deduced through the findings of this study that discourse markers play a significant role in written text. This necessitates the need for language instructors to develop the capability of the students to use discourse markers effectively in writing and answering essay questions. Efforts should be expended to incorporate a variety of the discourse markers in examples cited so as to pave avenue for learners to know their correct uses. Copious list of DMs and their proper usage should be provided during the lecturer-student interactions so as to ameliorate the students' low comprehension of them. Lecturers teaching English language should use different effective strategies to teach discourse markers. Avenues should be provided where students can involve in conversation and dialogues where DMs are used properly. Moreover, students should be exposed to writing on various issues and answering comprehension passages. With this, they will achieve the pedagogical goals that DMs are meant to provide. The language teachers should use questions to identify the students' understanding of the DMs and check comprehension through written text feedback.

The study reveals students' inadequate mastery of discourse markers which has significantly affected their written work as well as answering questions on diverse areas. This prompts the need for students to be up and doing in studying maximally the discourse markers instead of exhibiting lackadaisical attitude to this important concept. The diligence and readiness to learn and effectively use these discourse markers across responses both in written and spoken forms will invariably improve their performance. Seminars and presentations should be encouraged during Use of English lectures so that students can showcase their linguistic ability. Through this, when there are occasions for presentation in their

various Departments they can be at liberty to avail themselves of the opportunities.

To this end, it is suggested that further study could be carried out on the use of discourse markers among students in other institutions of learning such as colleges of education and polytechnics. Moreover, other research could be done to cover more universities so as to determine the use of discourse markers among their undergraduate students.

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