Using English Discourse Markers to Enhance Speaking Skills: A Case Study at Van Lang University

Sy Phu Truong [1*]

[1] Faculty of Foreign Languages, Van Lang University, Vietnam
*Corresponding author's email: sy.tp@vlu.edu.vn
* https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6023-3306
https://doi.org/10.54855/ijte.22256

ABSTRACT

Vietnamese learners of English have paid little attention to English discourse markers (DMs) although DMs play a significant role in the speech of native English speakers. Furthermore, few studies of DMs used by Vietnamese learners have been carried out. This research aims at identifying the participants' perceptions of making use of DMs in conversational English and the ways they apply DMs in English conversations as the initial stage to prepare them for a plan of action that could fill the research gap. By means of audio recordings and questionnaires conducted in an English major class of 30 first-year students at Van Lang University (VLU), this research discovers that most of the participants acknowledge the vital roles of DMs in conversational English such as facilitating general communication and indicating the speaker's attitude. The research also finds that a plurality of the students is very limited in their use of DMs when making conversations. Therefore, as a recommendation, speaking courses should include DMs instructions. These results make a contribution to more studies on how to instruct DMs in conversational English so that the English-speaking skills of the students at VLU could be enhanced.

Introduction

These days, it is obvious that English plays a pivotal role in cross-cultural communication. Furthermore, Vietnamese people study English not only to obtain knowledge but also to develop a solid command of language skills so that they can communicate with outsiders, particularly native English speakers, in communication across cultures. Increasingly, Vietnamese students are learning English in order to move overseas to work, live, and study in English-speaking nations or to get positions with foreign firms or organizations based in Vietnam.

Having been teaching English at VLU for an academic year, the researcher realizes that many students have a key difficulty while speaking English: they fail to avoid extended periods of silence in a conversation, which hinders fluency and communication. Another issue is that native-speaker lecturers can be difficult to be understood at times owing to redundancy. Native English speakers use DMs to reduce long silent periods (long pauses) in speech and to manage

their talks for effective face-to-face communication, but students at VLU seldom employ these in their English-speaking courses, most likely due to a lack of knowledge about DMs or incorrect usage of the DMs. For native speakers of English, DMs are natural and powerful tools for fluency in oral and face-to-face communication. This study focuses on finding detailed knowledge gaps regarding the students' perceptions of DMs in conversations and the ways they use DMs in speech. Accordingly, some recommendations for teaching DMs in speaking courses at VLU are given to deal with the student's problems.

Literature review

Communicative Competence and Communicative Approach

The goal of the communicative approach or CLT (communicative language teaching) is to assist students in developing communicative competence. For Muller (2005, p. 18), there is a close relationship between communicative competence and DMs. Grammar competence is the foundation for all communication and is one of the four pillars of communicative competence. The usage of DMs also demonstrates other characteristics (sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competency). Sociolinguistic competency, in particular, is critical for negotiating the connection between the speaker and the hearer in a conversation, which may be accomplished through the use of phrases such as *"you know*" and *"well"*. In addition, discourse competency entails knowledge of establishing coherence in discourse, which may be carried out via DMs. Furthermore, strategic competence is demonstrated when non-native speakers use DMs to demonstrate challenges in vocabulary choice (choosing the suitable word to pronounce) and to draw the audience to understand.

Discourse Markers' definitions and functions

According to Carter and McCarthy (2006, p. 208), DMs are words or phrases that operate to link portions of the discourse in various ways that reflect the speaker's decisions to organize and manage the discourse. Single words like *so, well, fine, like, okay, right, anyway* and phrasal items such as *for a start, I mean, you know, mind you, as I say* are the most prevalent DMs in casual everyday spoken English. The theory is absolutely crucial for VLU students to arrange and control their face-to-face English dialogues.

DMs, for Fung (2011, p. 233), are words and phrases that organize and regulate the progression of a piece of text. In spoken English, the most typical DMs are *you know, right*, *I mean, actually, well, so, and*. DMs are used to identify the beginnings, and endings of a conversation and the boundaries of topics at a global level. At a local level, DMs hold ideas together in a conversation and highlight the links between idea units (continuation, sequence, contrast, and conclusion). In addition, DMs can convey the speaker's feelings. Fung's views are also the foundation for resolving the above-mentioned student concerns.

According to Fox Tree (2010, p. 278), DMs play a critical role in assisting communicators in gaining a grounding in unplanned or spontaneous communication. Grounding means the process by which individuals check for comprehension when they speak with one another in order to guarantee that the communication's present goals are met (Fox Tree, 2010, p. 276). In this perspective, it is critical to employ DMs engaged in spontaneous conversations, particularly

in face-to-face dialogues. To manage a conversation, Fox Tree (2010, p. 271) claims that DMs are one method of responding to an initial message. According to Fox Tree, DMs are inserted; other means include juxtapositions, changes, and concomitants (body language and facial expressions). Generally, DMs serve as a technique for controlling interactions.

DMs help the text receiver to realize coherence relations which hold various portions of the discourse together, according to Taboada (2006, p. 567). They aid in the organization and linking of the discourse or communication in general. Wei (2011, p. 3456) illustrates how DMs (or pragmatic markers) contribute to discourse coherence through interpersonal and textual functions. DMs use textual functions to connect diverse portions of the discourse, whereas interpersonal functions focus on the relationship between the speaker and the listener and smooth the interlocutor interaction.

Liu (2013, p. 153) states that DMs perform interpersonal and textual roles. The textual roles include introducing a new turn, marking transitions (topic shifting), initiating or terminating a digression, presenting a reason or explanation, introducing self-correcting, direct speech, floor holding, and fillers. The interpersonal roles are composed of conveying an attitude or reaction, showing the speaker's reluctance, and achieving sharing and cooperation between the speaker and the listener (saving face, expressing and checking comprehension, and verification).

Obviously, DMs play crucial roles in a conversation. It might result in pragmatic and semantic problems if the speaker fails to employ or misuses DMs (Polat, 2011, p. 3745). According to Wei (2011, p. 3457), to achieve English proficiency, learners have to be capable of using DMs as a component of their linguistic skillset. As a result, it is quite essential to consider DMs while training speaking skills.

Teaching English Speaking skills

According to Thornbury (2005), speaking requires more than the capacity to compose and pronounce grammatically accurate phrases. Speaking, in reality, demands the mastery of certain sub-skills such as the management of turn-taking and numerous types of knowledge namely phonology, sociocultural knowledge, pragmatic awareness, and the knowledge of discourse (Thornbury, 2005, p. 1 & 11). Furthermore, for Luoma (2004, p. ix), speaking is frequently accomplished in actual time, necessitating the speaker's capacity to organize, process, and produce the second or foreign language. The speaker, in particular, must be capable of processing and delivering speech with little hesitation as well as responding correctly to attain or sustain communicative goals and amicable connections. In terms of the assessment of speaking, Luoma (2004, p. ix) claims that face-to-face encounters in actual time are typically used to assess speaking capacity. The theory consolidates the significance of employing DMs in the skill of speaking. Consequently, teaching DMs at VLU's English-speaking classes appears to be unavoidable.

In relation to teaching English-speaking skills to Vietnamese students, Huynh (2020, p. 45) recommends that lecturers of English should pay more attention to teaching students the use of oral communication strategies when they cannot find the appropriate words during their conversations and provide them with useful idiomatic expressions and collocations to help them manage oral communication successfully. This is closely related to teaching DMs in speaking

courses so that the Vietnamese students at VLU, who are in similar circumstances, can better their speaking performance in English.

In two examples from daily face-to-face interactions, Jung (2008, p. 1-4) contrasts the usage of *but* by a learner from Korea, a non-native English speaker (NNS), and a native English speaker (NS). The researcher discovers that the NNS simply contrasts two opposing notions, with no meaning of interaction. However, instead of being a corrector, the NS utilizes *but* to express himself politely as a person who cares about his mate's feelings. The discoveries of Jung support Thornbury's theory, which is discussed below.

For Thornbury (2005, p. 27), second or foreign-language speaking is not the same as first-language speaking. Consequently, the author proposes a knowledge foundation that is necessary for non-native English speakers: fundamental grammar, a crucial vocabulary with 1000 high-frequency items, formulaic methods to implement popular acts of speech, a key list of multi-word units, a good command of pronunciation features, context factors and, particularly, several popular DMs for effective conversational English speakers as follows:

Discourse markers	Meanings or Functions
Well	This marker is a popular technique to start a turn and relate it to the one before it, frequently to denote the start of a contrast, such as a difference of opinion.
Oh	*Oh* is used to begin an utterance or to respond to the preceding speaker's remark, and it commonly conveys astonishment.
You know, I mean	These DMs are employed to draw the listener's shared knowledge (*you know*) and indicate that some form of explanation would follow (*I mean*) to gain and keep the attention on the speaker.
And, or, but	These three DMs are employed to link ideas *and* show continuity, *or* suggest an alternative, and mark a difference.
Because, so	These two DMs are utilized to imply that what comes after is the cause (*because*) or the outcome of what came before (*so*).
Then	*Then* is employed to indicate an inference on the basis of what has been spoken by the interlocutors.
Now, right, anyway	These three DMs indicate the start or the end of a speech section.

To make the knowledge base ready for application in face-to-face talks, it is imperative for English lecturers to increase the student's understanding of the goal knowledge, assist the students to integrate the desired knowledge with their current understanding, enhance the student's ability to prepare the knowledge for communication in real-time (Thornbury, 2005, p. 40). Furthermore, according to Fox Tree (2010, p. 273), DMs must be studied not only in the native tongue but also in the second language. As a result, DMs really need to be taught in speaking courses, to some extent.

Research Questions

The researcher intends to learn about VLU first-year English major students' perspectives on DMs and to investigate their usage of the markers in order to enhance their speaking skills and help them communicate successfully in English. Two research questions have been posed:

1. What are VLU first-year English major students' perceptions of employing discourse markers in English conversations?

2. How do the first-year English major students at VLU employ discourse markers in their

English conversations?

The researcher's actions regarding novel teaching methodologies or programs will be guided by the answers to the research questions (including DMs teaching in speaking lessons as an example). This research is noteworthy since it studies the usage of DMs in Vietnamese non-native English speakers' speech. The study will be beneficial to VLU students by teaching them how to utilize the markers successfully and helping them to improve their overall speaking skills. This also aids Vietnamese learners in being more conscious of DMs in the skill of speaking, facilitating their English communication across cultures.

Methods

Action research

For Hinchey (2008, p. 4), action research is a study undertaken by members of an organization or institute for a better insight into empirical concerns or challenges, to prepare steps to ameliorate the circumstances. This research belongs to the category of action research because it was conducted by a VLU inside lecturer to comprehend the students' empirical issue of failing to avoid extended pauses in conversation, which is linked to DMs, to organize and implement the actions of teaching to better their speaking ability.

Population and sample of the study

There are over 12 first-year English major classes at VLU every academic year, and they are the population. This research takes a class as the sample. Convenience sampling is the basis for choosing this class. The class is composed of 30 adult Vietnamese students who major in the English language. The students were surveyed in the second term of the first academic year 2020-2021. It took approximately three months to design this study and to collect and analyze the data (April 2021 – June 2021).

Tools of data collection

The tools of data collection used in this study are questionnaires and audio recordings.

Questionnaires

The questionnaires aim at getting VLU first-year English major students' perceptions of DMs in English conversations including 6 statements (S1 – S6) utilizing a Likert scale of five points. The statements focus on the most basic functions of DMs in oral communication such as showing the speaker's attitude or oiling the general communication wheels.

Audio recordings

This research tool is essential for addressing the second research question. According to Hinchey (2008, p. 84 & 85), audio recordings can capture specific phrases, emphases, or pauses. Consequently, audio recordings assist in clearly demonstrating the students' use of DMs in oral communication. 15 pairs of students were formed from 30 participants. Each pair had a short conversation within 2 or 3 minutes about *"Activities on your Tet holiday"*. By using an audio recorder, 15 short conversations were recorded. Then all the conversations were transcribed for analysis.

Data collection procedures

Step 1: The researcher asked the participants for permission, and then the audio recordings were made.

Step 2: The participants were asked to answer the questionnaires completely with clear instructions.

Data analysis

The recordings were transcribed so that the participants' use of DMs can be analyzed. The transcriptions of the audio recordings were analyzed on the basis of Thornbury's suggested list of DMs in spoken language.

The questionnaires were processed and then analyzed by the researcher.

Findings and discussion

Findings

Research question 1*: What are VLU first-year English major students' perceptions of employing discourse markers in English conversations?*

Table 1. Results of the questionnaires

Perception Statements	Frequency (N=30)				
	totally agree	*agree*	*not certain*	*disagree*	*totally disagree*
1. DMs can show the speaker's attitude. (S1)	13	8	6	2	1
2. The sequencing of the speaker's ideas may be clearly illustrated by using DMs. (S2)	6	8	14	2	0
3. Without DMs in the discussion, the speaker-listener relationship could sound more distant. (S3)	4	13	6	3	4
4. Responding with DMs might have a facilitative and softening impact. (S4)	11	12	3	4	0
5. The conversation could be incoherent if DMs were not present. (S5)	8	13	6	2	1
6. DMs can oil the communication wheels in general. (S6)	13	10	4	2	1

It can be seen that most of the students (13/30, accounting for 43.3%) fully acknowledged the pivotal roles of DMs in showing the speaker's attitude and easing general communication.

Secondly, the majority of students agreed that if no DMs are used in the conversation, the relationship between the listener and the speaker could sound more distant (13/30 or 43.3%), that showing replies with DMs can lead to a facilitative and softening effect (12/30 students or 40%), and they also agreed that the conversation would be incoherent if there are no DMs (13/30 participants or 43.3%).

However, approximately half of the participants (14/30 or 46.6%) were not aware of the roles of DMs in displaying the sequence of the speaker's ideas.

The above findings reveal that the participants were aware of the fundamental functions of DMs in spoken language (showing the speaker's attitude, facilitating communication, or making the conversation coherent). Nevertheless, they lacked the knowledge of further roles of DMs in speaking, which made them fail to avoid long silence or redundant pauses in speech.

Research question 2*: How do the first-year English major students at VLU employ discourse markers in their English conversations?*

After transcribing the audio recordings of 15 short conversations, DMs that were used by the participants are listed as follows:

Table 2. DMs used by the participants

Conversations	DMs used
1	oh, then, and, so, because, you know
2	oh, and, so, because
3	so, because, and, or, oh
4	and, so, but, because
5	because, and
6	so, oh, and, or, because
7	because, and
8	so, because, and, but
9	because, so, or, but, and, then
10	and, because
11	so, because, and, well
12	and, because
13	so, and, oh, because
14	so, because, and, oh
15	and

The data shows that DMs used by the participants were different in the conversations. Some conversations appeared up to 5 or 6 DMs while several others used only 1 or 2 DMs. This means that the students' use of DMs in speech varied considerably. Nevertheless, all or nearly all of the conversations contained ***and***, ***because***. Table 3 gives a closer look at the frequency of the DMs used by the participants.

Table 3. Frequency of DMs used in 15 conversations

Discourse markers	Frequency (N=140)	Percentage
and	54	38.57%
because	44	31.42%
so	22	15.71%
oh	9	6.43%
but	4	2.86%
or	3	2.14%
then	2	1.43%
you know	1	0.71%
well	1	0.71%
I mean	0	0%
right	0	0%
now	0	0%
anyway	0	0%

Firstly, it is clear that almost all of the participants used ***and*** (54 out of 140 times in all the conversations) and ***because*** (44/140 times) in their short conversations to link the ideas and give the reasons. In other words, the first-year English major students at VLU can use these two DMs well when making conversations in English.

Secondly, most of the participants could use ***so*** (with a frequency rate of 15.71%) and ***oh*** (6.43%) to indicate the results and show their surprises. Particularly, ***so*** and ***oh*** were used in 10 and 6 conversations respectively.

Thirdly, ***or, but*** and ***then*** appeared in 2 or 3 talks (with the frequency rate of 2.14%, 2.86%, and 1.43% respectively), which means that the students were really limited in using DMs to indicate an option (***or***), to signal a contrast (***but***) and to mark an inference based on what interlocutors have mentioned (***then***).

However, ***you know*** and ***well*** were employed in one conversation only, and they were used only once. This proves that almost no participants could use ***you know*** for drawing the hearer's shared knowledge and ***well*** for initiating a turn or signaling the beginning of a contrast.

Finally, compared to the list of common DMs (Thornbury, 2005), the students did not employ these 4 DMs: ***right, now, anyway***, ***I mean.*** This proves the fact that the students lacked the knowledge of using DMs to signal the beginning and closing of a turn (***right, now, anyway***) and to demonstrate clarification (***I mean***) in a conversation.

Discussion

Through the research findings, it can be concluded that VLU first-year English major students perceived the basic roles of employing DMs in English conversations (showing the speaker's attitude, facilitating the communication, or making the conversation coherent), but they would need much more knowledge of this language aspect for fluent English. It could be explained that formulaic expressions and set phrases are undervalued when teaching English in the Vietnamese context (Tran, 2021, p. 38). To bridge the students' knowledge gap of further functions of DMs in speaking, teaching DMs in speaking courses at VLU could help.

In addition, the results reveal that the participants could use ***and, because, so***, and ***oh*** to a certain degree, but most of them could not employ other DMs, which limited their fluency and face-to-face communication. In fact, the participants showed a lot of redundant pauses and silence while making English conversations, and this made them feel so embarrassed at being the face-to-face conversations. In other words, the first-year English major students at VLU employed DMs restrictively in their English conversations. Due to the lack of DMs used, their conversations were not performed fluently and naturally, leading to the fact that they failed to avoid extended periods of silence in the conversations. This can be explained that native speakers or bilingual users employ DMs in communication with ease, but it is difficult for non-native speakers of English to use DMs (Pham, 2021, p. 65).

Last but not least, there have been no studies on Vietnamese learners of English related to using DMs in speech. However, a relevant study by Pham et al. (2022, p. 39) on factors influencing English-majored students' speaking performance showed that the highest rate was pressure for well-organized speech, particularly coherence and cohesion, spelling, grammar, and accuracy.

The result is similar to that of the present research in terms of students' lack of fluency in speech. Consequently, teaching DMs in speaking would contribute significantly to solutions to the problem because the need for teaching and learning to use DMs in speech as well as the roles of culture and society in language communication are recognized (Pham, 2021, p. 70).

Recommendations for teaching DMs in speaking courses

It is proposed that DMs training be included in English-speaking classes, particularly in conversations, at the university. Although the students were aware of the functions of DMs to some extent, their use of these DMs was apparently limited. Among 13 DMs in Thornbury's list, they used just two DMs well, and two other DMs were employed relatively well. As a result, most of the students spoke English with a lot of unnecessary hesitations or long pauses, which limited their oral communication. Therefore, teaching English speaking skills to Vietnamese students at VLU should change in some ways. Firstly, it is essential for lecturers at VLU to impart sociocultural knowledge, discourse knowledge, and pragmatic awareness to the students. This also applies to a curriculum and course syllabus modification. More importantly, DMs must be taught in speaking lessons by increasing the student's awareness of DMs, assisting them in understanding these markers' functions in conversational English, and developing their capacity to use DMs in face-to-face conversations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aims at finding the answers to the research problems mentioned. When speaking English, the students fail to avoid extended periods of silence in a conversation, which hinders fluency and communication. At the same time, native-speaker lecturers sometimes difficult to be understood owing to redundancy (using DMs in speech). Native speakers of English employ DMs to reduce long silent periods or redundant pauses in speech and to manage their conversations for effective face-to-face communication, while students at VLU seldom use these in their English-speaking courses. Two research questions are raised to help find the answers.

As a result, for the first research question, the findings show that the participants fully recognized the significant functions of DMs in face-to-face interactions such as showing the speaker's attitude and oiling the general communication wheels. They also agreed that using DMs in the conversation could create a closer relationship between the speaker and the listener, a facilitative effect when showing responses, and a coherent conversation. However, a large number of them were not aware of the functions of DMs in sequencing the speaker's ideas (and many other roles). This can be concluded that due to the significant lack of DMs knowledge, the students could not find a way to avoid long silence or redundant pauses in speech, and it was sometimes difficult for them to understand native-speaker lecturers when DMs were used in native speech.

In terms of practice, for the second research question, the participants were able to use several DMs (*because, and*, *oh* and *so*), but they were almost unable to use other DMs (including *or, but*, and *then*), meaning that most of them were really restricted in the application of DMs in oral communication. Particularly, no or few participants could use *you know*, *I mean, well*,

right, *now*, *anyway* when holding their conversations. Consequently, necessary steps should be taken so that the students' speaking skills can be enhanced. To begin with, explicit instructions for DMs need to be done in speaking classes at VLU. Accordingly, the course syllabus should include new relevant contents, namely sociocultural knowledge, and discourse knowledge because this language aspect is closely related to culture and society. It is expected that the situations will be ameliorated after the DMs teaching which has been ignored in speaking courses at VLU.

This study took a small sample of 30 students in only one class, so the results cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, the findings can serve as the first stage to prepare students in similar circumstances for an action plan so that they are able to employ DMs for better English-speaking skills. It is recommended that further studies on how to instruct DMs in face-to-face conversations at VLU be done to improve the speaking skills of the students. These studies will form a scientific basis for adopting effective methods of teaching DMs which are suitable for VLU's students.

Acknowledgments

References

Carter, R., & McCarthy, M. (2006). *Cambridge Grammar of English: A comprehensive guide spoken and written English grammar and usage.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fox Tree, J. (2010). Discourse markers across speakers and settings. *Language and Linguistics Compass, 4* (5), 269–281. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-818x.2010.00195.x

Fung, L. (2011). Discourse markers in the ESL classroom: A survey of teachers' Attitudes. *Asian EFL Journal, 13* (2), 199-248.

Hinchey, P. (2008). *Action Research.* New York: Peter Lang.

Huynh, T. (2020). Problems of learning speaking skills encountered by English major students at Ba Ria-Vung Tau University, Vietnam. *European Journal of English Language Teaching, 5* (4), 39-48. http://dx.doi.org/10.46827/ejel.v5i4.3144

Jung, J. (2008). Discourse Markers in Cross-Cultural Conversation. *Teachers College, Columbia University, Working Papers in TESOL & Applied Linguistics, 8* (2), 1-4.

Liu, B. (2013). Effect of first language on the use of English discourse markers by L1 Chinese speakers of English. *Journal of Pragmatics, 45* (1), 149-172. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2012.11.002

Luoma, S. (2004). *Assessing speaking.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Muller, S. (2005). *Discourse markers in native and non-native English discourse.* Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Pham, M. T., Nguyen, D. N. Q., Nguyen, T. K. C., Nguyen, H. N. M., Hoang, T. A. T., & Pham, V. P. H. (2022). The Reality of English Presentation Skills of English-majored Students in Vietnam: A Case Study at Van Lang University. *International Journal of TESOL & Education, 2*(2), 27-46. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54855/ijte.22222

Pham, N. D. (2021). Discourse Markers in English and Vietnamese Communication. *South Asian Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 3*(2), 63-70. DOI: 10.36346/sarjhss.2021.v03i02.005

Polat, B. (2011). Investigating acquisition of discourse markers through a developmental learner corpus. *Journal of Pragmatics, 43* (15), 3745–3756. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2011.09.009

Taboada, M. (2006). Discourse markers as signals (or not) of rhetorical relations. *Journal of Pragmatics, 38* (4), 567-592. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2005.09.010

Thornbury, S. (2005). *How to teach speaking.* Harlow: Longman.

Tran, T. M. L. (2021). Students' and Lecturers' Perceptions of Idioms Teaching and Learning in Speaking Skill for Freshmen at FOE, Thuongmai University. *International Journal of TESOL & Education, 1*(3), 37-53. EOI: http://eoi.citefactor.org/10.11250/ijte.01.03.003

Wei, M. (2011). Investigating the oral proficiency of English learners in China: A comparative study of the use of pragmatic markers. *Journal of Pragmatics, 43* (14), 3455-3472. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2011.07.014

Biodata

Sy Phu Truong is a lecturer of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Van Lang University, Vietnam. He holds an M.A in TESOL from Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia. He has 18 years of teaching English to Vietnamese learners of many levels. His research interests include teaching language skills, discourse analysis and business English.