AN ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE MARKERS IN ACADEMIC REPORT WRITING: PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Writing seems to be the most complex of the four basic languages skills. It is a process that requires both the knowledge of Morphology and syntax because letters have to be appropriately put to form words and words to form phrases and sentences. There are different types of writing that are done to achieve different purposes. Academic writing is one of the writing skills that students are to acquire before completing their programme of studies in higher institutions of learning. Being a professional and critical writing, it is intended for professionals, experts and informed audience on the field. Academic writing deals with investigated facts rather than fiction or prose. Learners in higher institutions need the skills because it is mandatory for them to submit research projects to their departments as partial fulfillments for the award of certificates or degrees in their programme of studies. However, sometimes what the students submit does not communicate well or depict their professionalism. One of the problems they face is appropriate use of discourse markers to enhance coherence among text elements. This study analyzed the use of discourse markers to enhance effective academic writing such as Laboratory Reports, Field Trip, Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) or final year project Reports. Different views of scholars were examined and discussed. The study re-emphasizes the need for teaching and appropriate utilization of discourse markers to enhance effective academic report writing.

Keywords: Discourse, discourse analysis, discourse markers, academic report Writing.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the four basic language skills that pupils and students are taught in academic institutions in order to function well in their various fields of studies. In language teaching, developing writing skill starts with the identification of letters which gradually moves to the acquisition of the complex skills. It is the most complex and difficult of the four basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). This is because it involves linguistic competence such as the knowledge of morphology and syntax. Approaches to the teaching of writing vary since there are many aspects. As indicated by Mc Donough & Shaw (1998, p. 181) in Dulger (2008), writing can be dealt with in four levels where handwriting, spelling and punctuation constitute the first level sentences, grammar, and word choice the second, paragraphs the third, and the overall organization the last. . In other words, from the perspective of teaching writing, the students are assumed to learn firstly to write down words -a combination of letters-, and then to form sentences by using appropriate words with correct

punctuation. And this is basically a matter of structure analysis not above the sentence level. On the other hand, writing paragraphs or larger units of discourse requires aspects more than the patterns within the sentence level do.

In academia, writing is an essential skill that is required in almost every activity that learners engage in during their study periods. Writing as a process varies according to purpose and context. In order to write effectively, linguistic competence is the basis. The knowledge of morphology and syntax for example form a rudimentary knowledge (the knowledge words and sentence structures). Developing writing skills requires different approach as there are different types of writing. Each type of writing is requires certain style. This means that developing writing skills a complex and difficult task.

Academic report writing is different from composition writing because it is based on investigated facts. It is a professional writing which requires the learners to acquire its critical skills and conventions. Every kind of writing that involves investigation into a complex phenomenon in institutions of learning falls under academic report writing. They are research papers which could be a term paper, laboratory report, thesis or dissertation. These reports have the seasoned or well educated scholars and experts in the field or people having more knowledge of the subject matter than the learners/writers.

Objectives of the study

This aims to analyse the use of discourse markers in five randomly selected final year projects of Language and Communication Arts, Modibbo Adama Federal University of Technology, Yola. This aim is hoped to be achieved through the following objectives:

- To present the views of scholar on some basic concepts underlying the topic of study
- To identify the discourse markers prevalent in academic report components
- To discuss the pedagogical implications.

Method of investigation

The study is both quantitative and qualitative. The five project reports forming the study corpus were first read. Secondly, list of discourse markers identified in the various components was made. Finally, the discourse markers identified were discussed.

What is a Report?

There are different answers to the question what is report just as there are different types of report. Central to most of the answers is the fact that report is a process geared towards solving a problem, clarifying or establishing facts. Two parties are always involved in the process, the approver of the process and the person carrying out the process. Reports are therefore the outcomes of an investigation into a problem or issue carried out to determine facts or find solution. The person or persons that approve the investigation provides terms of references. These are guide lines determining the scope of the investigation and what investigators are to do.The case of academic writing, conventional structure as approved by the institutions serve as guidelines. Reports are highly organised or structured written facts drawn from some laid down procedures. Report writing according to Russel (2008), differs from essay writing because it has a different purpose. They are common communication tools as they assist in the decision making process. Written for a particular purpose, they usually

outline a problem, provide the relevant facts and ideas to the situation, and then recommend a course of action. Reports are highly structured so that the information they contain can be easily understood. Headings within the report allow the reader to select the parts they wish to read. Headings also enable each section of the report to stand alone. The structure of a report is enhanced through the use of subheadings, diagrams, tables, graphs, illustrations etc. Put it short report is a highly structured outcome investigation into a phenomenon. Discourse markers make these structure hang together and help the reader predict or detect the relationship between the discourse elements.

Academic Report

In academia, reports are mostly written by a learner for the scrutiny of the teacher as a guide or supervisor. Academic report writing involves investigating, scrutinizing and presenting facts. It is a formal writing which requires that the facts should be presented in full grammatical sentences or standard language. In addition to formal linguistic features, academic report writing has conventional structures with peculiar information expected to be embodied in each part. In other words, it has peculiar organizational structures such as the introduction, the literature review, methodology, analysis, findings and discussions. These organizational structures vary from one discipline to the other.

Academic report writing is one of the aspects of writing that students engage in as part of their academic course of study. In higher institutions of learning, students are required to write and submit laboratory, field trip, students industrial work experience Scheme(SIWES) or project report in partial fulfilment for the award of a certificate or degree in their programme of studies. It is a purposeful exercise geared towards investigation into complex phenomenon which requires critical skills and professional knowledge. Academic reports at the final year level forms part of the process of evaluating the students to determine the extent of their professional competence. It is in line with this that students of higher institutions all over the world are required to demonstrate their professionalism by carrying out research in their fields of study. This type of research differs from one discipline to the other in content and style. Though reports vary in their purpose, they all have formal structure; carefully planned, and presented in a clear and concise language.

Discourse/Discourse Analysis

There are two types of language as potential objects for study: one abstracted in order to teach a language or literacy, or to study how rules of language work, and another which has been used to communicate something and is felt coherent (Cook 1992).The above entails that components or forms of language and how they cohere to communicate intents are what linguists and language philosophers use to investigate. Many linguists and scholars from related fields have examined the concepts "discourse and discourse analysis from different perspectives. It was Zellig Harris an America Linguist who first used the term 'discourse' in 1952. In the 1960s and 1970s, linguists and language philosophers began to use the term to use the term as an approach to the study of conversation and other forms social interactions Today discourse analysis encompasses many disciplines such as ethnography, anthropology, psychology and sociology.

This section does not aim to critically analyze the views of scholars on the concept but to present the readers with background knowledge to enhance understanding of the work. Cook (1992) defines discourse as the use of language for communication, and the search for what

makes discourse coherent as discourse analysis. Cook further explained that discourse may be composed of one or more well-formed grammatical sentences –and indeed it often is-but it does not have to be. The study of discourse as seen by Akmajian, Demers,Farmer and Harnish (2004) is the study of units of language and usage. They maintained that the study of discourse is the study of units of language and language use consisting of more than a single sentence, connected by some systems of related topics.

Similarly, Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2003) point out that linguistic knowledge account for the speakers' ability to combine phonemes into morphemes, morphemes to words, and words into phrases, clauses /sentences. Knowing a language also permits combining sentences to express complex thoughts and ideas. They refer to the larger linguistic units as discourse and that the study of discourse or discourse analysis is concerned with how speakers combine sentences into broader speech units. It involves questions of style, appropriateness, cohesiveness, rhetorical force, topic/subtopic structure, differences between written and spoken discourse as well as grammatical properties.

Matthew (1997) describes discourse as successive coherent sentence, spoken or (in most usage) written. It could be a novel, a speech by a politician or a lecture to students, an interview or any other series of speech events in which successive sentences or utterances hang together. He further states that discourse in general usage is a type or style of language such as political discourse, religious discourse or loosely whatever happens to the object of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis as traced by Matthew was originally applied by (Zelligs) Harris in the 1950s, to an attempt to analyze units of language larger than word and sentence.

Fairclough (1995) looks at discourse beyond analysis of sentences. He sees discourse as social practice, and discourse analysis as the analysis of how texts work within socio-cultural practice, such as analysis requires attention to textual form, structure, and organization at all levels, phonological, grammatical, lexical (vocabulary) and higher levels of textual organizations in terms of exchange system (the distribution of speaking turns),structures of organization, and generic (activity type) structure.

Discourse as a linguistic term embodies two things. The forms of language connected together and how they function to communicate coherent thought or idea. Discourse is associated with speech events and how units of language hang together to communicate message

Discourse Markers

Discourse refers to pieces of language larger than a sentence that function together to convey a given idea or information. The linguistic devices that are used to hang the pieces of language or expression together are called discourse markers. They are used in conversation or writing to show or signal the relationship between ideas or information in a given context. They are words or phrases used by speakers or writers to link ideas or information in a discourse. According Gerard (2010), discourse are words like 'however', 'although' and 'Nevertheless' which are referred to more commonly as 'linking words' and 'linking phrases', or 'sentence connectors'. They may be described as the 'glue' that binds together a piece of writing, making the different parts of the text 'stick together. Without sufficient discourse markers in a piece of writing, a text would not seem logically constructed and the connections between the different sentences and paragraphs would not be obvious. Discourse markers

however guide the reader predict the direction of the flow of discourse than linking the various text elements especially in spoken discourse. Brown and Levinson (1987) in Barnabas & Adamu (2012) opine that discourse markers are important features of both formal and informal native speaker language. The skilful use of discourse markers often indicates a higher level of fluency and an ability to produce and understand authentic language. Similarly, Litman (1996) cited by Barnabas & Adamu2012 opine that discourse markers are linguistic devices available for a writer to structure a discourse.

Discourse markers are grammatical/ functioning words. Unlike content words, they do not convey meaning on their own nor change the meaning of a sentence. They only perform grammatical functions by linking ideas in a piece of writing. Most discourse markers signal the listener/reader of continuity in text or the relationship between the preceding and following text. Without sufficient discourse markers in a piece of writing, a text would not seem logically constructed and the connections between the different sentences and paragraphs would not be obvious (www.warwick.ac.uk)

DATA ANALYSIS

The texts in the corpus of the study were subjected to manual analysis. Each of the research components (introduction, literature review, methodology, Result and summary sections) was read. The list of discourse markers found in each section was made in order to assess the extent of usage made of the discourse markers, that is, in terms of over use, or inappropriate usage. List of discourse markers was made based on their functions as adopted from www.warwick.ac.uk. Discussion of the finding was finally done based on the classification of the discourse markers by functions.

General survey of the texts

The five basic components of the selected final year projects of the students of language and communication arts were read. Any discourse marker came across was noted down in order to have compendium of discourse markers in each text. There were 68 discourse markers noted in text 1, 52 in text2, 59 in text3, 45 in text4 and 62 in text 5.The total number of discourse markers noted in the project is 286. The survey of the texts revealed that there are instances of over use of particular discourse markers such as also, because, however, therefore, for example among others.

Discourse markers in the introduction sections of the texts in the corpus.

The introduction sections of the five texts in the corpus were read in order to identify the discourse markers used by the students. The following were the common discourse markers found: however, on the other hand, because, since, therefore, thus, in the light of this, such as, for example, for instance, furthermore, also, despite, instead, not only this, but...,in view of this, as a regard, in this case, in this sense, thus ,equally(21)

Discourse markers in the literature review section

The literature review sections of the texts in the corpus were read in order to identify the discourse markers employed by the students. The following discourse markers were identified: however, on the other hand, because, since, therefore, thus, to this end, to this extent, as a regard, for this reason, such, besides, while, another, contrastingly, first, further

More, not only that, more often than not, in particular, as well as, presently, as long as, inview of, in addition, on one hand ,in fact, so, for example, although,additionally,more recently,in these case.(34)

Discourse markers in the methodology section

The methodology sections of all the texts in the corpus were studied so as to assess the use of discourse markers by the students. The following are the discourse markers identified: since, such as, furthermore, while,(4)

Discourse markers found in the result sections

The data presentation, analysis, and discussion   section of the texts in the corpus were read so as to evaluate the discourse markers employed by the students for linking ideas. The following were the common ones found: on the other hand, on the other side, however, as a result, because, due to, since, by this, therefore, to this end, to this effect, such as, for example, for instance, also, although, while, just like, so as, so, with regard, in all of the above, as far as, as for, despite, in view of, furthermore, by this, equally(28)

Discourse markers in the summary, conclusion and recommendation section

As for the other sections, this section was read and the discourse markers used by the students were identified: the outcome is as follows: also, moreover, however, because, since, as a result, because, finally, therefore, thus, in the light of this, in the light of the above, so, moreover, moreso, as well as, in the final analysis, in the light of the above, also, just like, so as to, such a...,in spite of, (23)

The result of the prevalence of discourse markers in the basic components showed that the introduction section has 21, literature review has 34, and Methodology has 4, the presentation and analysis section has 28, while the summary, conclusion and recommendation section has 23. The total number of the discourse markers noted in the five components is 110.Each discourse marker in the five sections was counted only once unlike any instance of occurrence as in the five texts.

Classification of the discourse markers found in the texts by function

Classification of the discourse markers by function was based on two ideas www.warwick.ac.uk and *english.edusites.co.uk/* web site ideas
To compare: as well as, like, equally, on the other hand, on one ,hand,
To illustrate: For example, for instance, in particular, such as, in this case,in this sense,in the light of this, in this view,by this, to this end, to this effect,
Cause and Effects: Because, so, therefore, thus, as a result, for this reason
Making contrast between two different this,people or idea:on one hand, on the other hand, contrastingly, however,on the other side etc
Adding something or information:
Furthermore,also,in addition,additionally,besides,moreover,moreso,another, not only that, not only this etc
State reason or why something happened:because,since,as a result, due to,
Drawing conclusion: finally, thus, therefore, as a result,

Making unexpected contrast
Although, in spite, despite, though,
Drawing Conclusion
In all of the above, **moreover, furthermore, as a result,** in fact, as far as, as long as.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As stated earlier, all academic writing aims to inform clearly or establish facts. It should be easy to read, and professional in its presentation. In order to present a cohesive and coherent or well-structured report, the various elements building the embodied information must be glued together. Each current discourse should relate to the preceding ones. In other words, there should be smooth flow of ideas to enable the reader to follow the development of ideas in the discourse. There should also be signal of ties between the previous information and new information in the text to make the structure of ideas clear to the reader. In order to present coherent and meaningful reports, the students should have sufficient knowledge of the linguistic elements that make parts or units of ideas stick together. Most of /the time, teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) concentrate on the teaching of basic writing skills such as pre-writing activities (brain storming and outlining), writing stage (drafting), rewriting (revising 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 ESL should therefore expose the students to the various discourse markers and their functions. They are essential tools that are used to glue parts of a text to make them hang together. They are also essential tools that signal the reader about the direction of the discourse; in other words discourse.

The result of the analysis of the five texts in the corpus has revealed that discourse markers as signalling devices or sign posts in texts are diverse. The prevalence of the discourse markers found in each of the texts was noted. The result showed that text 1 has 68, text 2 has 52,has 59,text 4 has 45,while text 5 has 62.The number of discourse makers in each text could be more than what has been identified as the counting was done manually. The second stage of the analysis was the identification of discrete discourse makers in the five academic report components viz introduction, literature review, methodology, data presentation, analysis, findings and discussions and summary, conclusion and recommendation sections. Each variety was counted only once.The number of the discrete discourse markers found across each of the five components of the text is as follows: Introduction has 21, Literature review has 34, Methodology has 4, Data presentation, analysis, findings and discussions has 28 and Summary, conclusions and recommendations has 23.

The above analysis showed concentration of the varieties of discourse makers in the literature review. There were about 34 occurrences noted. This is probable because much discussion is expected of the students in this section. It is in this section that the students are expected to present scrutinized views of scholars on the topic of investigation in order to expose the reader to what has already been done and show where the present study fits in. The students therefore need to know the varieties of discourse markers that can be used for example to compare and contrast views of the scholars, contrast and disagree, show similarities and differences among others.

Data presentation, analysis, findings and discussions ranked second to the literature review. This could also be so, since the section requires much discussion also. The students are expected in this section to discuss their analysis. Sometimes, the results are compared,

contrasted, emphasized, generalized, and illustrated. The students need the knowledge of the appropriate varieties of discourse markers as shown under classification of discourse markers by functions. The summary, conclusion and recommendation section ranked third with 23 varieties of discourse markers. In this section, the discourse markers identified correspond with the task expected of the students to do, that is, leaving points of departure. As could be seen from the list of discourse markers identified in the section, some of them are suitable for making summary, while others for drawing conclusion. The introduction ranked fourth with 21 varieties. The discourse markers identified cut across the texts. Discourse markers such as for instance, furthermore, also, despite, in this case, in this sense, thus, are suitable for orienting the reader with the origins or remote existence of the problem under investigation. The methodology section has the least prevalence of the discrete discourse markers. This is not surprising since this section is based on existing strategies, and techniques of carrying out the research. There is little therefore that needs to be signalled or sign post to the reader

Pedagogical implications

Discourse markers are important tools that a writer can utilize to keep the reader brazed with the development and flow of information in a text. They serve as means of signalling to the reader the relationship between the current and preceding discourse. The outcome of the study could be used to form a good base for the teacher to determine the deficiency/weakness of the students in using discourse markers. Knowing the strength and weaknesses of the students will enable the teacher to plan to teach. The students can be grouped bases on their strength and weaknesses. There are two major deficiencies that the result of this study showed. Students have no enough knowledge on the various functions of the discourse markers. The students should be able to know for instance, the discourse markers that are suitable for adding points or information, contrasting ideas, making emphasis, exemplifying among others. In addition to knowing the functions, they should also know the variety of discourse markers suitable for each section.

Over use of particular discourse makers is second deficiency/weakness noted. Repetition of a variety usually sounds monotonous and boring. In writing, the reader may get confused and fail to follow the development or the direction of the discourse. This is because repetition of particular discourse marker is a clear indication the writer has little knowledge of varieties that could be alternated. The repetition of 'also' as a means of adding information, points or idea for instance could be avoided by using furthermore, moreover, in addition, beside, another among others.

In the case of academic report writing, the teacher could base the teaching of discourse markers on the various research components. The students should be exposed to the types of information expected in each component and the corresponding or relating discourse markers. They should as well be made familiar with the different types of discourse markers in order to enable the make good variation. Here, attempt should be made to provide a compendium of the discourse markers. From the compendium, the teacher should make effort to group them by functions (e.g exemplifying, contrasting, comparing, finalizing, emphasizing).

The teacher may use card board papers to list the discourse markers that students could alternate in order to avoid over use of particular discourse maker as the case of also, because, therefore, and while noted from the texts. A sample of a particular project component with discourse markers for grounded may be prepared and presented in the class. The presentation could be done with the aid of projector to enable the students focus attention on the same

thing at the same time. After the teacher's presentation, the students could be assigned project work to be done in group and be presented at the next class.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the texts in the corpus has revealed that discourse markers are essential linguistic devices that pilot the reader to the direction of the flow of discourse. They are devices that glue the current and preceding discourse together. Students need to be exposed to varieties of them and their application. This will save them from over use of a particular pattern or variety of discourse marker which may make it difficult for the reader to determine the direction of the flow or relationship between the current and the preceding discourse. The students are to learn how to produce and relate new ideas to the preceding ones so as to produce quality report.

This study has as well revealed that discourse markers are essential tools that enhance students' writing abilities. By appropriate usage of discourse markers, the students will produce coherent reports. The reader on the other hand will find it easy to locate the relationship between the current and the preceding ideas in a discourse. Therefore they are important to both the writer and the reader. Above all, the study has identified the various functions of discourse markers such as adding point, contrasting, illustrating, saying why something happen, making emphasis among others.

The analysis of the weaknesses and strengths of the students' usage of discourse markers enables the teacher to prepare accordingly. The teacher may group the students based on their strength and weakness. In this case, team teaching could be very effective.

The study recommends that the teaching of academic writing should not only be based on the linguistic features peculiar to each component but emphasis should also be made on discourse markers as devices that make information hang or stick together in a text. The teaching of academic report writing should therefore be a combined effort of the subject specialist and ELT teacher since the blending of the two will create balance. The role of discourse markers in creating coherent text therefore is indisput

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