
The use of English discourse markers in the argumentative writing of EFL Indonesian and Thai University students: A comparative study

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Abstract: *The study aims to investigate the kinds of DMs employed by Indonesian and Thai students in their argumentative writing, to compare the use of DMs by both groups in terms of its nature and problems, and to find out whether the use of the DMs produced by Indonesian and Thai students contributes to the coherence of the text they write. The 46 argumentative writings composed by the Indonesian and Thai students were analyzed following Halliday and Hasan (1976) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). The findings of this study revealed that the most frequently used discourse markers was the addition ones (for Indonesian students) followed by concession and contrast, cause and result, and enumeration and order ones; and was the concession and contrast ones (for Thai students), followed by addition, cause and result, and enumeration and order ones, respectively. In addition, it was also found that there were several problems in the use of DMs (i.e. the various type of the use of DMs, missing verbs in finite clauses, use of DMs in complex sentences, run-ons, overuse of the DMs, and repetition of the use of DMs) and were encountered differently by both groups of students. Moreover, this study also revealed that there was a relationship between the use of the DMs and text coherence. Finally, instead of being caused by the matter of the use of DMs, this study revealed that the incoherent text was also triggered by several problems including grammatical errors, irrelevant sentences, and out-of-topic sentences.*

Keywords: *discourse markers, cohesion, coherence, argumentative writing, EFL university students*

1. Introduction

In producing a good paragraph, there are two main characteristics in common – coherence and cohesion (Boardman & Frydenberg, 2002). According to Richards and Schimdt (2002), coherence is the relationships which link the meanings of utterances in a discourse or of the sentence in a text. In other words, in written texts, coherence refers to the way a text makes sense to the reader

through the organization of its context, and the relevance and clarity of its concepts and ideas. Another characteristic of a good paragraph is cohesion. According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996), cohesion refers to surface-level signals that reflect the discourse organization of a text and the intended purposes of the writer. In addition, McDonough (2002) defines cohesion as a general name for linguistic devices which signal the textual structure which represents the coherence of the message encoded.

Some cohesive devices are linking words, personal pronouns, definite articles, demonstrative pronouns and synonyms (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). From those aspects, the linking words are considered the most influential aspect within a text as they function to link the elements of sentences or paragraphs (Schiffrin, 1987). In the present study, the term of discourse markers (henceforth DMs) refers to those linking words. The primary function of DMs is to explicitly signal the relationship between units of the text (Biber et al., 1999). In this way, DMs occur to maintain the unity of an idea of a text. Hence, without sufficient DMs, a whole unit of thought does not seem to be fully constructed, coherent and united. Moreover, the misuse of DMs may affect or even break the coherence of a text. A study conducted by Prommas (2011) shows that the occurrence of DMs is necessary since the DMs used in essays are transitional words which are the most potential and obvious devices to show relationship of ideas. Further, other problems in using DMs may include overusing and lacking of DMs (Modhish, 2012; Prommas, 2011). As a result, for EFL students it seems that this element is not quite easy to deal with. There must be some causes and results underlying this matter. In fact, some research findings did not obviously mention them. Thus, since there are still many issues found in this area of study, the investigation of DMs is still worthwhile.

Furthermore, only a few research studies have been conducted to compare the use of DMs among the non-native speakers. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate the use of DMs from this infrequently explored dimension, for instance comparing the use of DMs among EFL students in South East Asian countries. In particular, it is worth considering comparing the use of DMs between EFL Indonesian and Thai students since the role of English in Indonesia and Thailand is similar – as a foreign language. Both countries, therefore, may share many similarities related to English teaching

and learning. In addition, other similarities and differences may be found in the characteristics of the students, the difficulties in learning English, the students' English competence, etc. The understanding of these similarities and differences can lead to lessons that can be shared to improve the linguistic skills of EFL students.

Considering that EFL students should be able to produce good writing, they need to know better the components of cohesive devices, particularly DMs. The knowledge of DMs will also help them to compose writing. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), research studies about DMs contributing to textual coherence and cohesion are considerable. Nevertheless, despite the previous studies about DMs, few are about the comparison of the use of DMs in written language between non-native and non-native EFL students. In this regard, the present study examine the use of English DMs in the argumentative writing, the kind of writing produced by EFL Indonesian and Thai students that relies rather heavily on DMs for its logical quality.

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), cohesion is the grammatical and lexical relationship between different elements of a text which hold it together. The cohesive devices work in connecting the elements of the text in order to create the text cohesion, i.e. using reference, substitution/ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Further, the use of DMs will connect the components among the sentences (Schiffrin, 1987). The tightness of the components of text can help the students produce a cohesive text.

Then, related to the coherence, the coherence is the ways in which the components of the textual world mutually accessible and relevant (de Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981). There are some criteria of coherence that can help the text makes sense to the reader, i.e. having linear organization, shifting with the topic, using DMs, beginning with clear and effective

introduction, and making few grammatical errors (Moreno, 2003). To be more specific, one of the criteria of coherence is the use of the DMs. To produce a coherent text, the DMs are employed to link logical ideas within the sentences in order to make a text more understandable. Therefore, this can be concluded that cohesive devices (discourse markers) and coherence work together to help the students produce a good text, as well as, an understandable one.

According to Richards & Schimdt (2002), argumentative writing is a textual genre which attempts to support a controversial point or defend a position on which there is a different opinion. Moreover, this genre of the text is aimed to persuade or convince the reader of a certain case. Since an argumentative text consists of pros and cons or comparison and contrast of certain issues, the sentences should present the ideas appropriately. Thus, it needs DMs to show the transitions of the ideas in order to be coherent. For instance it employs a lot of DMs. As mentioned in a study by Prommas (2011), discourse markers used in essays are mostly transitional words. The reason maybe that transitional words are the most potential and obvious device to show relationship of ideas. As a result, they are abundantly evident in the argumentative text.

The terminology of DMs varies by different perspectives of scholars. In literatur, the DMs have been referred to by several terms such as cohesive elements (Halliday & Hasan, 1976), conjunctions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1987), pragmatic markers (Fraser, 1999), discourse operators (Redeker, 1991), conjunctive adverbials (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999), linking words (Boardman & Frydenberg, 2002), logical connectors (Quirk et al., 1985), linking adverbials (Biber, et.al., 1999), and discourse connectors (Cowan, 2008). Thus, in the present study, the term “discourse markers” refers to those various terms functioning to mark the transitions within a text.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) state that DMs express certain meanings which presuppose the presence of other components in the discourse. The meanings conveyed by DMs are relatively straightforward: additive, adversative, causal, and temporal. In addition, Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) also categorize the DMs into appositive, clarifying, additive adversative, varying, matter, manner, spatio-temporal, and causal-conditional.

2. Method

The data obtained were 46 argumentative writings: 23 written by Indonesian students and 23 written by Thai students. According to the taxonomy of DMs adapted from Halliday and Hasan (1976) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), the DMs examined in this study covered four categories: 1) addition, 2) concession and contrast, 3) cause and result, and 4) enumeration and ordering. After the data collection, the students’ writings were examined by the researcher, experts of writing and grammar, and native speakers of English. The experts were English lecturers who were selected as they have been experienced in teaching writing and grammar for more than five years. Finally, the DMs found in the composition were identified, counted, and analyzed.

3. Findings and Discussion

For general view of DMs used in Indonesian and Thai students’ writings, the total number and frequency of DMs found is initially investigated (See Table 1 and Table 2).

Table 1
Total Number of Discourse Markers Used

Groups	Total DMs Used
ID	400
TH	337
Total	737

Table 2
Frequency of the Use of Discourse Markers

No	Groups	CATEGORIES OF DMs				TOTAL
		AD	CC	CR	EO	
1	ID	31.25%	26.75%	21.50%	20.50%	100%
2	TH	27.89%	31.75%	21.66%	18.69%	100%

The quantitative results revealed that the presence of DMs in the Indonesian writing was higher than that in the Thai students'. Regarding to the frequency of each category of DMs, DMs of addition (AD) were the most frequent DMs used by Indonesian students. This reflected that Indonesian students were more frequently making additional information toward their arguments. On the contrary, among the categories of DMs concession and contrast (CC) were the most-popular choice among the Thai students. These findings also reflect the inherent nature of the argumentative genre which requires the writer to make an argument with some supporting and opposing ideas of an issue. Additionally, the DMs of addition category was followed by concession and contrast (CC), cause and result (CR), and enumeration and order (EO) category occurred in the Indonesian students' writing, while in the Thai students' writing, those of concession and contrast were followed by addition (AD), cause and result (CR), and enumeration and order (EO) category respectively.

In terms of the types of DMs, the DMs used in Indonesian and Thai students' writing have various types. Among the types of DMs, Indonesian and Thai students shared similar tendency to employ because of its more frequent occurrence. This indicates that they made causative relation more in expressing their points of view toward a case. Next, for Indonesian students, they also frequently used *if*, *and*, *when*, and *also* in their writing. For Thai students, this was slightly different as they mostly employed *and*, *when*, *if*, and *so*.

Furthermore, the problems the EFL Indonesian and Thai students encountered when using DMs in their argumentative writing were both grammatical and functional errors dealing with the various type of the use of DMs (i.e. because/ because of), missing verbs in finite clauses, use of DMs in complex sentences (i.e. when-clause and because-clause), run-ons, overuse of the DMs (e.g. but, although, and because), and repetition of the use of DMs (i.e. because, if, for example, when, and then). The problems encountered by each group were not similar, yet for certain problems, they only appeared in either Indonesian or Thai students' writing i.e. the various types of the use of DMs and use of DMs in complex sentences especially because-clause only occurred in the Indonesian students' writing. Plausible causes of the problems were given in relation to insufficient knowledge of complex-sentence formation, unawareness of grammatical restrictions DMs with variant, L1 interference, written Thai style transfer, and oral culture influence (Prommas, 2011; Bennui, 2008).

To sum up, the similarities of the use of DMs occurred in the Indonesian and Thai students' writings are summarized in the following table (See Table 3).

Finally, the present study also revealed that there was a relationship between the number of DMs and the text cohesion. This indicates that the DMs were used appropriately in the argumentative writing composed by Indonesian and Thai students. Similarly, with regard to the coherence of a text, there is a relationship between the use of DMs and the

Table 3

The Similarities of the Use of Discourse Markers

No	Aspects	Indonesian Students and Thai Students
1.	Frequency of the use of DMs	DMs of Cause and result and enumeration and order became the third and fourth category of DMs produced by Indonesian and Thai students. Here, it indicates that both groups make use of the function of these DM categories in their argumentative writing. The functions are to show the reason, result, and purpose of the preceding information (cause and result) and to signal the order of the main points that speakers or writers want to make and indicate a sequence of steps in a process (enumeration and order).
2.	Problems of the use of DMs	Both groups of students similarly encountered some problems as follows: 1) missing verbs in finite clauses, 2) use of DMs in complex sentences, 3) run-ons, 4) overuse of DMs, and 5) repetition of the use of DMs.
3.	Types of DMs used	Among all types of DMs, Indonesian and Thai students highly employed because, so it became the first most often-appearing DM.

Table 4

The Differences of the Use of Discourse Markers

No	Aspects	Indonesian Students	Thai Students
1.	Total number of DMs occurred	Indonesian students employed 400 items of DMs in their argumentative writing.	There were 337 items of DMs occurred in Thai students' writing.
2.	Frequency of the use of DMs	DMs of addition were the most frequent used DMs found in the Indonesian writing.	For Thai students, concession and contrast was the first rank of the DMs.
3.	Types of DMs used	Among all DMs, the top seven of most-often appearing DMs were because, if, and, when, also, such as, and so.	The seven most-frequent occurring DMs were because, and, when, if, so, but, and such as.
4.	Problems of the use of DMs	For the various types of the use of DMs and the use of DMs in complex sentences (because-clause) specifically only appeared on Indonesian students' text.	Thai students were well-encountered various types of the use of DMs and the use of DMs in complex sentences.

coherence of a text. The discourse markers were used to connect the components of the sentences in the text, while the coherence dealt with the way how to make the reader understand the text better. Thus, this sort of relationship was on how cohesive devices (discourse markers) and coherence worked together

to help the students produce a good text, as well as, an understandable one. Furthermore, in this present study, the incoherent text was not only caused by the matter of DMs (i.e. the restricted/over-/miss-use of DMs), but this was also caused by other factors such as grammatical errors, irrelevant sentences, out-

of-topic sentences, etc. As mentioned earlier, based on previous research studies, this may be caused by L1 interference. Here, students' L1 influenced their L2 writing and caused some problematic errors (Budiharso, 2006; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Mirahayuni, 2002; Odlin, 1989). Grabe and Kaplan (1996) investigated the rhetorical contrasts between English and Thai in student writing which also revealed that Thai writers used more repetition, made extensive use of lists, often did not use conclusions, and tended to be more impersonal. Also, Mirahayuni found the absence or the overuse of explicit lexical signals appears as a problem which is indicated as the influence of writing practices in the non-native writers' first language and the Indonesian writer's attempt to find an appropriate format in the absence of well-established research writing conventions in the first language, as well as an impact of the sufficient knowledge and the low mastery of various linguistic resources. Similarly, Budiharso reveals that the problems result from the transfer of L1 cultural conventions to L2 performance in the three rhetorical aspects, such as in general patterns of thought (linear or non-linear), development of ideas, and coherence.

4. Conclusions

Indonesian and Thai students shared some similarities and differences in the use of DMs. The similarities included having DMs of cause and result and enumeration and order as the third and fourth categories of DMs, encountering similar problems of the use of DMs (missing verbs in finite clauses, use of DMs in complex sentences, run-ons, overuse of DMs, and etc), and employing *because* as the first most often-appearing DM while the differences were in terms of the total number of DMs used frequency of the use of DMs, types of DMs used, and problems of the use of DMs. Finally, this study also reveals there is a

relationship between the use of DMs and the textual cohesion. The DMs link the components of the text to make a text cohesive. Similarly, with regard to the coherence of a text, there is a relationship between the use of DMs and the coherence of text. The use of DMs can help the writer to connect the sentences of the text to create logical order of the ideas. Therefore, related to the pedagogical implications, it is suggested that the knowledge about DMs should be taken into account explicitly in the writing class in order to improve students' knowledge of DMs. As a result, the students can be able to produce a cohesive and coherent text.

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