Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the quality of English writing of level four students in Taiz University and to find out whether there is correlation between writing quality and the variable of gender. It also aims at investigating the use of discourse markers that Yemeni English Foreign language learners use in their composition writings. The research questions addressed in this paper are (1) what are the discourse markers that are frequently used by Yemeni EFL learners? , and (2) is there a direct relationship between the use of such markers and the writing quality of the learners? The 10 essays written by the study sample were analyzed following Fraser's (1999) taxonomy. The findings of the study reveal that the most frequently used discourse markers are the collateral ones, followed by the inferential, discourse activity, contrastive, discourse structure, causative and topic change markers. It is also shown that there is a positive correlation between learners' writing quality and gender of the participants. The paper concludes with some recommendations and suggestions that could participate in improving this critical area of language studies.

Key words*: Discourse, Discourse Markers, Coherence, Coherent Devices, Cohesion, Cohesion Types, Contrastive analysis, First Language Interference

1. Introduction

In Yemen, English language is taught as a foreign language. It is being taught in public schools from grade seven onwards, though the quality of public school instruction is low. Although private schools, following either a British or an American system, teach English and produce proficient speakers, Arabic is still the language used for the communicative purposes.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015**
Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   217

The number of English speakers in Yemen is small compared to other Arab countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, UAE, and Saudi Arabia.

1.1   Linguistic Differences between Arabic and English

Arabic is from the Semitic language family, while English is an Indo-European language. The Arabic and the English languages differ in many respects. English language systematically and linguistically differs from Arabic Language. And this gap of matching makes English language learning even more difficult. Arabic is a synthetic language as the form of any word indicates almost all its grammatical characteristics such as gender, person, number, tense and others. For example, the word "katabtu" corresponds exclusively to "I wrote", neutral, singular, first person, past simple tense. English, on the contrary, is an analytical language, which requires additional words to fulfill these functions, and the meaning of words is responsible predominantly for the semantics. The differences could be seen at the different linguistic levels.

At the phonological level we could see that Arabic has 28 consonants and 3 vowels while English language has 24 consonants and 8 vowels and diphthongs. English beginners confuse with the spelling of words like "bet" beat", and "beet". Arabic is a vocalized language, it gives no importance to short vowels in writing so Arabic students confuse spelling words like "pan", pen" and "pin" "thread". Arabic has several diacritics (small vowels) that can be written above or beneath each letter. These diacritics are most of the time assumed to be guessed by the Arabic reader. Most Arabic texts are written without these diacritics. So consonant clusters, such as in the words *split*, *threw* or *lengths*, also cause problems and often result in the speaker adding an extra vowel: spilit, ithrew, or lengthes. Arabic has gutturals and emphatic consonants which are absent in English.

At the morphological level we could find that the root words of Arabic are purely three-consonant- based and all derivative words are formed by combining the three-root consonants with fixed vowel patterns and; sometimes, an affix. This kind of difference could cause some kind of confusion when articulating or spelling English words as per the irregularity of English spelling rules.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015**
Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   218

At the syntactic levels English has no gender and cases, for example, "they write", "I write" the verb "write" does not indicate its gender and case on its own; the doer does. Word order is also different- adjectives always follow nouns in Arabic while in English the former precede the latter. In English the sentence pattern is SVO while Arabic as a VSO patterned language. There is a large potential for errors of interference when Arab learners produce written or spoken English due to the differences between the two languages at the different linguistic levels.

1.2 Discourse

Discourse is a communicative event in which language plays a prominent role. It minimally requires a sender (writer, speaker), a receiver (reader, listener), and a message that is being communicated. This message is not merely a concatenation of clauses; it forms a unified, coherent whole. Both the sender and receiver normally have the implicit agreement that the message being communicated is coherent.

1.3 Coherence and Cohesion

Coherence can be reserved for the conceptual relationships that comprehenders use to construct a coherent mental representation accommodated by what is said in the discourse. Coherence, in linguistics, is what makes a text semantically meaningful. It is especially dealt with in text linguistics. Coherence is achieved through syntactical features such as the use of deictic, anaphoric and cataphoric elements or a logical tense structure, as well as presuppositions and implications connected to general world knowledge. The purely linguistic elements that make a text coherent are subsumed under the term cohesion. Coherent devices refer to - Repetition of a Key Term Phrase, synonyms, pronouns, transitional words, sentence pattern. Cohesion refers to the ways in which texts are 'stuck together'--the ways in which sentences are linked or connected by various linguistic and semantic ties."

Cohesion, on the other hand, is limited to the linguistic markers that help the speaker/writer to build such coherent representations. Cohesion emphasizes discourse-as-product, and coherence emphasizes discourse-as-process. Cohesion and coherence can be grammar driven and vocabulary driven. Cohesion can be *Grammatical-* concerns such matters

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015**
Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   219

as reference, ellipsis, substitution, and conjunction-, *lexical*-concerns such features as synonymy, antonymy, metonymy, collocation, repetition, etc., and *instantial cohesion* - concerns ties that are valid only for a particular text.

Grammar-driven cohesion refers to sentence structure, word structure, and the intonation of the discourse segments. Vocabulary-driven cohesion refers to the lexical vocabulary of the discourse segment. Cohesive markers, then, activate both vocabulary-driven (pre-grammatical, knowledge-based) and grammar-driven (syntax-based) coherence. Vocabulary-driven and grammar-driven coherences are interrelated - they support each other for the production of a comprehensible input. There is no single discourse marker that necessarily fulfills any one or exclusively only one function. They can have more than one function and relate to more than one level of discourse.

1.4   Contrastive Analysis

As per the linguistic differences amongst languages, a new type of analysis came into appearance. Contrastive analysis is that type of linguistic analysis of two languages which points out the similarities and differences between them. Such analysis points at the specific features of each language system in its major areas: phonology, morphology, lexicology, syntax, text analysis (Johansson, 1975)**.**

Some errors could be attributed to first language interference. Lott (1983: 256) defines interference as 'errors in the learner's use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue'. There is a huge difference between English and Arabic in the use of discourse Markers. Furthermore, discourse markers have a multiplicity of functions, which means that a discourse marker may have more than one function and thus it can be used to signal a variety of relations between various written discourse segments. Somewhat more subtle distinctions are sometimes made. One can distinguish between discourse-as-product (the linguistic construct) and discourse-as-process (the communicative event).

Thus, researchers and teachers of foreign language have been working hardly to identify the problematic areas in the process of constructing a new system of language. To do so, they

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015**
Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   220

started to study the similarities and differences among languages, because similarities will ease the target language learning while differences hider it. Contrastive analysis plays a crucial role in the field of S/F LL. In order to avoid the occurrence of errors, you, firstly, need to spot them up; then, analyze them to trace and identify the actual reasons beyond their occurrence, and finally, set a list of suggestions and remedial treatments to avoid their occurrence in the future.

1.5   Discourse Markers

Discourse markers are those words and expressions which relate discourse segments and indicate the relationship between an utterance, and the prior discourse, functioning as indicators of discourse structure. They are characteristics of connected discourse, that is to say they contribute to discourse coherence, which signal the communicative intentions of discourse. They could be words or phrases, for example, a conjunction such as "and, but", an adverbial "now, then", a comment clause "frankly speaking", interjection "oh, well"— that is uttered with the primary function of bringing to the reader's attention a particular kind of linkage of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context (Redeker, 1991:1168).

1.5.1   Fraser's (1999) Taxonomy of Discourse Markers

Fraser (1999) classifies discourse makers in to two categories, propositional and non-propositional. Propositional discourse markers are used to relate the propositions or messages of the sentences while non-propositionals are used to signal an aspect of discourse structure or topic like organization and management. The propositional discourse markers are sub-classified into contrastive, collateral and inferential markers. The non-propositional discourse markers are identified as discourse structure markers, topic change markers and discourse activity markers.

1.5.1.1   Propositional Discourse Markers

The contrastive discourse markers signal the contrast between segments (2) and (1) in some aspects of interpretation. The group includes the following markers: (But, In contrast, Whereas, In comparison, On the Contrary, Conversely, Indeed, Instead of, Rather than, In fact, In reality, Otherwise, On the other hand, Alternatively, However, Though, Even though, As though, And though, Although, All the same, Despite, Even so, Except for, In spite of, Nevertheless, Nonetheless, Regardless, Yet, Still, Notwithstanding, But, Also).

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015**
Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   221

The collateral markers, functionally, shows a quasi-parallel relationship between the explicit contents of segment (2) and segment (1). The group includes the following items: (And, Above all, Also, Besides, Better yet, And yet, Well, For another thing, Furthermore, Moreover, In addition, Or, Aside from, More to the point, On top of it all, To cap it all off, What is more, I mean, In particular, Namely, Analogously, Parenthetically, That is to say, By the same token, Equally, Correspondingly, Likewise, Similarly, That said).

The inferential markers signal that segment (2) is a conclusion of the explicit proposition of segment (1). This group of markers includes the following items: (So, Of course, Accordingly, As a consequence, Consequently, As a logical conclusion, As a result, Because of, Hence, It can be concluded that, It stands to reason that, Thus, Therefore, In this case, Under these conditions, At any rate, Then, All things considered, In any event, In the light of the foregoing).

The last propositional discourse markers group is the causative markers. This group specifies that segment (2) provides a reason for the proposition presented in segment (1). The items of this group are "After all", "Because", and "Since".

1.5.1.2   Non-Propositional Discourse Markers

The first non-propositional discourse markers are the discourse structure markers which work as organizers for the components of the topic. They indicate the beginning, middle and end of the text. This group includes the following makers: (Once again, At the outset, Finally, First/second, Lastly, To start with, In the first place, Next, Moving right along).

The second non-propositional group of discourse markers is the topic change markers. They signal the shift of handling topics. The items of the following group include:(By the way, To return to my point, Back to my original point, That reminds me, Before I forget, Incidentally, Just to update you, Speaking of x, To change to topic, On a different note, While I think of it, With regard to).

The third non-propositional discourse markers are the discourse activity markers. This

Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   222

group of markers indicates that the current discourse is merely an activity that illustrates, exemplifies or explains a preceding one. The discourse activity markers include the following: (For example, For instance, To explain, To clarify, To illustrate, According to, To interrupt, In short).

Finally, due to the linguistic differences between Arabic and English, Yemeni students, inevitably, make errors regarding the use of the discourse markers when writing in English.

2. Literature Review

Modhish, A. S. (2012) has done a case study entitled "Use of Discourse Markers in the Composition Writings of Arab EFL Learners" in which he investigated the use of discourse markers that Yemeni EFL learners use in their composition writings. He investigated the discourse markers that are frequently used by Yemeni EFL learners , and tried to check whether there is a direct relationship between the use of such markers and the writing quality of the learners in question or not.

The study sample included 50 essays written by level three students and was analyzed following Fraser's (1999) taxonomy. The findings of the study revealed that the most frequently used discourse markers were the elaborative ones, followed by the inferential, contrastive, causative and topic relating markers. The findings also showed that there was no strong positive correlation between learners' total number of discourse markers used and the writing quality of the participants. There was, however, a positive correlation between the topic relating markers and the writing quality of the learners.

Finally, Mudhish enriched his conclusion with some valuable recommendations. He advised the EFL programs in the Arab world and in the other similar contexts treat writing as a separate skill and not to be looked at as a secondary skill that is not given the attention it deserves. He also insisted on EFL learners being encouraged by writing instructors to adventure with the language and not to be unnecessarily cautious of making errors as this might lead learners to be rather inhibited. And he concluded his recommendations by advising English language teachers in general and EFL writing instructors in particular to tackle the discourse

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015**
Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   223

markers inductively and deductively, and provide learners with adequate exposure in L2 which will certainly enable learners to pay attention to these linguistic items and become aware of the facilitating role they play in making their texts more coherent and cohesive.

Frahan Z. & Fannoush T.(2005) has examined the difficulties that are likely to be encountered in translating discourse Markers from English into Arabic i.e. translating the *SL* discourse markers into their *TL* equivalents in Arabic. The study is reserved for the investigation of discourse markers according to Fraser's (1999) discourse markers model. Translation and critical discussion of two English texts (Scientific and Journalistic) taken from two English magazines (The Reader's Digest and The Time), conducted by (3) M.A. students of translation, College of Arts, University of Mosul, are given

The study concluded with the fact that English style has a clear-cut tendency to the use of discourse markers in more profusion and diversity than Arabic. In the translation of discourse markers from English into Arabic, there was indeterminacy across several sub-classes; for example, a contrastive discourse marker may be rendered by an inferential one and vice versa. The students agreed in the translation of the coordinators "but", and "and", while they faced difficulty in the translation of subordinates. The study could also highlight another problem that there is mixing propositions for conjuncts i.e. (discourse markers) and vice versa which could be considered as another source of ambiguity and mistranslation, for example "as" in some part of the written text was not a discourse marker but rather a preposition.

3. Research Objectives

The current paper is an investigation into the use of discourse markers in the English writing of the Taiz English department graduates. It aims at:

- Evaluating the quality of writing of level four students in Taiz University
- Investigating the correlation between writing quality and gender
- Identifying the problematic areas regarding the use of the English discourse markers and how they affect the quality of English writing and the possible reasons beyond their occurrences.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015**
Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   224

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

The sample of the current study is five students of the English department, Taiz University, Yemen, two males and three females. The data collected for this study was merely 10 essays written by five volunteers, two essays each. The place of the test was the dean office where they could sit quietly to do the task without any disturbance. The time set for the test was one hour for both essays. However, the students were asked to write the beginning and finishing time to make it easy for the scholar to identify the mean of time duration per essay.

Essay number	Starting time	Finishing time	Duration in minutes
1+2	10:15	10:53	38
3+4	10:15	11:10	55
5+6	10:15	11:20	65
7+8	10:15	11:15	60
9+10	10:15	11:12	57
Total of minutes			**275**
Mean of time per essay			**275/10= 27.5**

Table (1)

4.2 Data Collection Procedure

As the current study is a descriptive one, 60 students volunteered for the mission, and out of the list five students were randomly chosen. The researcher gave the students three alternative topics, which all were connected to them and their interest. 10 essays, two essays each, written by these learners were subjected to thorough analysis and attention was focused on their use and manipulation of discourse markers so as to achieve a unified piece of writing at the essay level. Fraser's (1999) Model of discourse markers analysis has been chosen for studying discourse markers. Fraser has classified discourse markers into two major classes with subclasses. The first is propositional discourse markers while the second is non-propositional discourse markers. With regard to writing quality, the 10 essays were rated by two EFL writing instructors on the basis of (*task response*, *use of coherence and cohesion, grammatical range and accuracy, mechanical accuracy, and organization*).The collected data were analyzed mainly quantitatively

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015**
Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   225

and qualitatively. To this end, statistical measures were utilized to present data statistically by means of frequency of occurrence of discourse markers, mean of occurrence and percentages.

4.3 Writing Assessment Criteria

The scholar adopts two procedures for evaluating the essays. The first procedure is a holistic one, dealing with the text as a complete unit (White, 1985). She made an adaption between the TWE (Test of Written English) criteria and the General Assessment Criteria for academic writing assignments in International Master's Programmes to come up with the following holistic criteria assumption:

task response(content evaluation) number of ideas relating to task (5m	coherence and cohesion (5mks)	lexical resource (5mks)	grammatical range and accuracy(5mks)	Mechanical accurcy(3 m)	Organisation (2mks)
addressing all parts of ta	fitness of writing parts all together	choice of words	appropriate and accurate use of preposition	proper format	introduction
relevancy of ideas to the t	logical flow of sentences	correct time of use	appropriate and accurate use of verb conjugation	correct spacing	body
organization of ideas	is the writer understood to the reader	correct place of use	appropriate and accurate use of atricles	punctuation	conclusion
extending ideas and supp (bring facts of experien to support ideas)	use of conjunctions	correct way of use		spelling	
	use of coherent and			capitalization	

	cohesive devices				
	intelligible relationship between sentences				

<div align="center">Table (2)</div>

4.4 Identification and Classification of Discourse Markers

The second evaluation procedure was descriptive and analytic. According to Fraser's 1999 Discourse Markers Model, the discourse markers were labeled according to the frequency of their occurrence- the discourse markers belong to one category were listed together under that category. The scholar aims at investigating the most discourse markers used by the Yemeni students when writing in English according to the frequency of use of each category. The categories set by Fraser's 1999 Model are as follows:

Discourse Markers	
Propositional Discourse Markers	**Non- Propositional Discourse Markers**
1. Collateral Discourse Markers	1. Discourse Activity Markers
2. Inferential Discourse Markers	2. Discourse Structure Markers
3. Contrastive Discourse Markers	3. Topic Change Markers
4. Causative Discourse Markers	

<div align="center">**Table (3)**</div>

5. Results and Discussion

According to the criteria set in table (2) for doing a holistic evaluation of the writing proficiency of the students, table (4) shows that the students have fulfilled low writing

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015**
Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   227

proficiency rates with an average rate of 12.4 out of 25 which equalizes to 50%. Only one student fulfilled a good rate of achievement, 19.5 with a percentage of 78%.

Number of the stude	gender	task respons content evaluat	coherence and cohesi	lexical resource	grammatical range and accuracy(5 mks)	Mechanical accuracy	Organization (2mks)	total out of	Percentage
1	m	5	2.5	3.5	4	2.5	2	19.5	78
2	f	4	1	2	2.5	1	0.5	11	44
3	f	3	1	2	2	1.5	1.5	11	44
4	m	3	0.5	2	1.5	2	1.5	10.5	42
5	f	4	0.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	10.5	42

Table (4)

Regarding the correlation between writing performance and gender, we could see in table (5) that male students have fulfilled better achievement with a percentage of 60% compared to female students', 43.3. Accordingly, there is a noticeable correlation between writing proficiency and gender.

Gender	Total	Percentage
Male	30	60%
Female	32.5	43.3%

Table (5)

Regarding the results which came out from the analysis done following Frazer's Discourse Markers Model, they were as follows:

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015**
Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   228

Contrastive Discourse Markers	
Item	**Frequency of occurrence**
But	13
Even if	1
Total	**14**

<center>Table (6)</center>

As table (6) shows the use of contrastive markers was only restricted to two markers, "but" and "Even if". Whereas "but" has achieved a frequency of 13, "even if" has only one. This could be attributed to first language interference, as in Arabic the word "but" has may equivalents like "bal", "bainama", "lakinna" which has different semantic meanings in different contexts. When writing in English, Arabic students use "but" to capture all those semantic meanings as being the only substitute.

Collateral Discourse Markers	
Item	**Frequency of occurrence**
And	22
Furthermore	1
Moreover	3
Also	9
Or	2
In addition	1
Total	**38**

<center>Table (7)</center>

As table (7) shows the students used 6 collateral markers, out of which two markers only achieved higher frequencies, "and" and "also", as they fulfilled frequencies of "22" and "9" respectively. This could be attributed to first language interference. In Arabic the collateral marker "wa" is the equivalent to the English one "and", and "Aydan" is the equivalent to "also". There are also so many collateral markers in Arabic like "Kadalika", "bilidafa", "adif ila dalika", "Alawatan ala dalika", "aw"… But "wa" (and) and "aydan" (also) are more commonly used in

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015**
Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   229

both standard and colloquial forms of language. The other markers, on the other hand, are only used in Standard Arabic. Here lies the reason beyond the frequent use of "and" and "also" when writing in English language.

Inferential Discourse Markers	
Item	**Frequency of occurrence**
So	20
therefore	2
Thus	2
Total	**24**

Table (8)

As table (8) shows the students used 3 inferential markers ,"so", "therefore", and "thus", out of which one marker , "so", achieved the highest frequency of occurrence as it fulfilled a frequency of "20". This could also be attributed to first language interference. The English inferential marker "so" has many equivalents in Arabic Language, "lida", and "wa li hada al sabab", "wa buna'n alaiyahi". "so", in Arabic, can semantically cover the meanings of some other English inferential markers. That's why we find Arabic students overuse it when speaking or writing in English.

Causative Discourse Markers	
Item	**Frequency of occurrence**
Because	8
Total	**8**

Table (9)

Table (9) shows that the students used one causative markers,"because", with a frequency of occurrence of "8".. The Arabic equivalents to "because" is "liana" and it can semantically cover the meanings of some other English causative markers. That's why we find

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015**
Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   230

Arabic students overuse it when speaking or writing in English. Thus, we could say that first language interference and the less exposure to English along with the limited use and practice of English can be considered as major factors for the appearance of such phenomenon.

Discourse Structure Markers	
Item	**Frequency of occurrence**
generally	1
Finally	6
To conclude	1
On the whole	1
First of all	1
Secondly	1
Then	1
Total	**12**

Table (10)

Regarding the frequencies of the discourse structure markers, table (10) shows that "finally" was used for seven times while the other six markers were used once each. In colloquial Arabic, speakers use less structure markers than they do when speaking Standard. We could say that the students transfer their linguistic habits of language use from Arabic into English.

Topic Change Markers	
Item	**Frequency of occurrence**
As we know	2
Regarding to	2
In my opinion	2
Total	**6**

Table (11)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015**
Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   231

As table (11) shows the students used 3 topic change markers,"as we know", "regarding to", and "in my opinion" with similar frequencies of occurrence as they fulfilled "2"frequencies each. Each marker of the three has an Arabic equivalent that has the same semantic meaning. Those Arabic equivalents are usually used in both Standard and Colloquia Arabic. The low rates of frequency reflect the ignorance of the students of the use of such markers during discussions, debates, or argumentations. We could say that the students transfer their linguistic habits of language use, both positive and negative, from Arabic into English.

| Discourse Activity Markers	
Item	**Frequency of occurrence**
Such as	3
For example	9
To sum up	3
Total	**15**

Table (12)

As table (12) shows the students used 3 discourse activity markers ,"such as", "for example", and "to sum up", out of which one marker , "for example", achieved the highest frequency of occurrence as it fulfilled a frequency of "9". This could also be attributed to first language interference. The English discourse activity marker "for example" has two equivalents in Arabic Language, "mathalan", and "ala sabeel al mithal". In Arabic, "for eample" is more commonly used and semantically cover the meaning of "such as". That's why we find Arabic students overuse it when speaking or writing in English.

Discourse Marker	**Frequency of occurrence**
Collateral Discourse Markers	38
Inferential Discourse Markers	24

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015**
Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   232

Discourse Activity Markers	15
Contrastive Discourse Markers	14
Discourse Structure Markers	12
Causative Discourse Markers	8
Topic Change Markers	6
Total	**117**

Table (13)
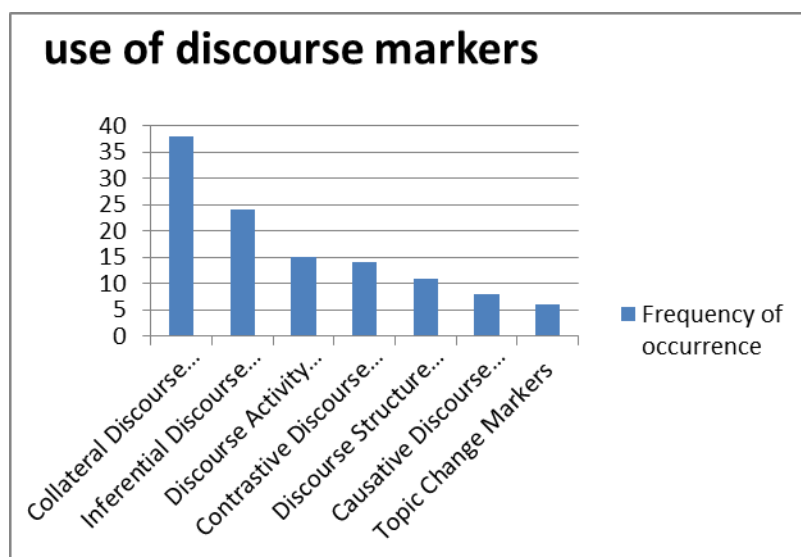
Figure (1)

As we see in table (13), the students used a total of 117 discourse markers. The collateral discourse markers achieved the highest frequency of occurrence, 30, where the collateral discourse marker "and" alone fulfilled a frequency of 22, see table (7). It could be attributed to the influence of the mother tongue of Arabic as Arabic native speakers overuse this particular marker. The inferential discourse markers achieved a frequency of 24, see table (8) where "so" alone achieved 20. This high achievement could be related to the type of topic itself that involves a deeper level of discussion which made the candidates employ such kind of markers to link the ideas together in order to maintain the unity of the discussion. On the other hand, the topic change markers fulfilled the least frequency of occurrence, 6, see table (11), where three markers have been used with an equal frequency of 2 each. The low rates of frequency reflect

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015**
Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   233

the ignorance of the students of the use of such markers during discussions, debates, or argumentations. We could say that the students transfer their linguistic habits of language use, both positive and negative, from Arabic into English. This low and paralleled rate of frequency indicates the candidates' low fluency level and shortage of vocabulary; which could be attributed to the less practice of English language and the dominance of Arabic language use for the communicative purposes.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

The low quality of writing reflected the need to intensify our focus, as teachers, on developing the writing abilities of the students. Teachers should provide students with enough chances to take part in interactive writing activities. They should design different types of activities that authenticate the use of the discourse markers in communicative contexts with reference to their equivalents in Arabic. This could reinforce their comprehension of the different types of discourse markers and their uses. Teachers should also enhance better environment for learning by involving the students in cooperative writing tasks, providing them with more challenging and exciting tasks connected to their interests and lives, and by giving them constructive feedback. Better ways of teaching could raise the students' interest to achieve higher levels of learning. Regarding the educational institutions, they can design syllabi in which the four skills are employed to scaffold the improvement of writing capability. Carefully planned set of activities could give the students better chances of practicing the four skills all together in order to improving the language proficiency of the students. The teachers need to involve the students in

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Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   234

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Thekra Mohammed Abdullah Yehia
Use of Discourse Markers: A Case Study of English Writing by Yemeni Students   235