

A Developmental Study of Chinese EFL Learners' Use of Discourse Markers in L2 Writing

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Abstract

Discourse markers have pragmatic functions like promoting discourse fluency, expressing attitudes, constructing and managing coherence (Fraser, 1996; Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Most previous research focused on the use of specific discourse markers (Diskin, 2017; Gaines, 2011; Hasselgreen, 2004) or made a comparison between the non-native speakers and native speakers (Ament *et al.*, 2018; Buysse, 2017; Liu, 2016; Wang & Wang, 2008) while the studies of the use of discourse markers from a developmental perspective are few. Therefore, this study aims to study discourse markers in L2 writings by describing and comparing the use of discourse markers used by the same group of Chinese EFL learners at varying proficiency levels. The participants in the current study are 30 English majors from the same grade. All of them are invited to write about the two same topics when they are sophomores and seniors. All of them have passed TEM-4 when they are sophomores. This study collects and analyzes data from their L2 writings. The researcher identifies and tags each discourse marker used in the L2 writings according to the function it has the context. After coding, the distribution, rate, and variety of discourse markers are calculated. The effect of varying language proficiency levels on the use of discourse markers is explored. Results indicate the continuation markers are used the most, followed by causal markers, contrast markers, sequencing markers, elaboration markers, opening and closing markers, summary or concluding markers, and topic shift or digression markers. The overall patterns of discourse markers' distribution and rate in the two periods are similar while the total variety presents a difference that the seniors use more various discourse markers than the sophomores. The results suggest that language proficiency level is associated with discourse markers use. Participants of high proficiency use more various discourse markers. Therefore, the present study can contribute to our understanding of discourse markers through an in-depth analysis of L2 writing, improve EFL learners' L2 writings quality and bring some important pedagogical implications for L2 writing assessment.

Keywords: discourse marker, L2 writing, developmental study

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Discourse markers (DMs, hereafter) are widely

used in communication. DMs perform important pragmatic functions in L2 writings. As a kind of formulaic language, the functions of DMs include promoting discourse fluency,

expressing attitudes, constructing and managing coherence, etc. (Fraser, 1996; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Hasselgreen, 2004).

DMs have played an important role both in first and second language acquisition since they are constantly used by native speakers and non-native speakers in interaction. In communication, the speakers or writers usually adopt various methods to achieve their purpose of communication, including DMs. Around the 1980s, many foreign scholars gradually paid attention to the discussion of the use of DMs. Schiffrin (1987: 31) defined them as “sequentially dependent elements that bracket units of talk”. Fraser (1996: 168) referred to them as “linguistically encoded clues which signal the speaker’s potential communicative intention”. However, people haven’t reached a common concept about the definition of DMs because DMs cover a variety of alternatives. DMs have different labels like discourse operator (Redeker, 1991), pragmatic marker (Schiffrin, 1987). As Redeker (1991) indicated that DMs lack clarity and consistency in the definitions and the use of theoretical terms and analytical categories, but at the same time, the various terms and definitions provide researchers with different approaches to study DMs.

Among these terms above, “discourse marker” and “pragmatic marker” are used by researchers the most frequently. There are researchers supporting that “discourse marker” is different from “pragmatic marker” because they think the former is usually used in the written discourse and the latter is used in the oral speech. Beeching (2019) referred to “pragmatic marker” as the expression emphasizing the interpersonal aspect of language use while “discourse marker” emphasizes the textual aspect.

Even if no clear definition can be found in the previous studies, many studies have suggested that DMs have certain commonalities. For instance, DMs never change the truth condition of propositions and carry little semantic meaning. They do not add anything to the propositional content of an utterance (Jucker & Ziv, 1998). And DMs have an emotive and expressive function rather than a referential, or cognitive function. DMs do not express propositional meaning or semantic meaning, while they facilitate comprehending procedural meaning. So DMs are not merely limited to semantics, but more related to pragmatics. DMs are capable to accomplish a series of pragmatic

tasks which contributes to their multifunctional capabilities.

Writing is a process of creating unified and coherent text. L2 writing is a complicated process influenced by a lot of factors, such as language proficiency, task type, language instruction. With the improving status of English as a lingua franca and the expansion of English in the world, many EFL learners are required to write English compositions in academic activities or English exams. It is very important for EFL learners to deal with DMs to complete satisfactory and efficient writing in L2 writings.

Although DMs are multifunctional and play an important role in L2 writings, they have received relatively little attention in the study of L2 writings. Most previous research examined the use of DMs in oral speech (Fernández *et al.*, 2014; Liu, 2016), focused on the use of specific DMs (Diskin, 2017; Gaines, 2011; Hasselgreen, 2004) or made a comparison between the L2 learners and native speakers. Some studies found that the L2 learners usually use less frequency of DMs and use them in a more limited way than the native speakers (Ament *et al.*, 2018; Fuller, 2003; Wei, 2011). But there are still a number of important questions which is needed to be further explored. For example, few studies focused on the overall pattern of DMs use even though some studies of DMs revealed the importance of specific markers (Diskin, 2017; Gaines, 2011; Hasselgreen, 2004). Moreover, previous studies have stated that proficiency level is an important factor in the use of DMs while little attention is paid to the use of study from a developmental perspective (Diskin, 2017; Fernández *et al.*, 2014; Wei, 2011). This perspective can help us to explore the relationship between the proficiency level and pragmatic competence to give pedagogical implications to L2 writing assessment and to improve the pragmatic competence of Chinese EFL learners in L2 writings.

1.2 Purposes of the Study

Regarding the relationship between the use of DMs and pragmatic competence, DMs are used by EFL learners differing in proficiency levels. The learners contacting English for a longer period are in high language proficiency levels and more skillful in the use of DMs than those in low proficiency levels. Furthermore, the studies of the use of DMs across varying proficiency

levels provide us an opportunity to explore the EFL learners' writing ability. The focus of the present study is to explore the use of DMs in L2 writings performing the same tasks from a developmental perspective. The distribution, rate, and variety of DMs are identified through quantitative and qualitative analysis. The comparison between the L2 writings of the same topics in the different periods is investigated. The study attempts to shed light on filling the gap of previous studies because it studies the overall pattern of DMs from a developmental perspective. The study will explore the possible reasons behind the use of DMs and give pedagogical implications to improve the pragmatic competence of Chinese EFL learners in L2 writings.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Theoretically, the current study can further expand the scope of research which focuses on the use of DMs in L2 writings. Besides, the present research deepens our understanding of the functional aspect of DMs through analysis.

Practically, the findings of this study can provide some insights into L2 writing practice. Firstly, DMs can be used to effectively differentiate L2 learners' writing quality. DMs as connectors are essential to smooth communication, as they facilitate the correct interpretation of an utterance and express the speakers' intentions. Therefore, lack of DMs or improper use of DMs in writing may hinder comprehension and writing performance. However, over-emphasis on the use of DMs alone also can lead to negative pedagogical

consequences, as learners may be tempted to insert functionally inappropriate complex structures to increase DMs in their writings. Secondly, teachers need to consciously give instruction about the use of DMs. So, this study can bring some important pedagogical implications for L2 writing assessment. Thirdly, the present study can contribute to our understanding of DMs through an in-depth and fine-grained mixed-method analysis of L2 writing, and finally contribute to the design and application of task-based L2 teaching practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Classification of Discourse Markers

At present, researchers also cannot reach a consensus on the classification of DMs. DMs have different functions considering that the context and situation where they are produced is different. Based on the functions of DMs in written discourse and previous categorizations (Fraser, 1999), Ament *et al.* (2018) classified eight different sub-functions, including causal markers (e.g., so, because), contrastive markers (e.g., but, however, even though), continuation markers (e.g., and, in addition to), elaboration markers (e.g., like, such as, for example), opening and closing markers (e.g., now, in conclusion), sequential markers (e.g., next, after), topic shift/digression markers (e.g., anyway, then), and summary/conclusion markers (e.g., all in all, in a word). Although this classification is proposed based on the oral material, it is also very suitable for written material because the DMs are classified according to the functions of the textual markers.

Table 1. Ament *et al.*'s Classification of Discourse Markers

Causal markers	To show causal relationships to show consequence or effect, to mark the link between two clauses, give the rationale (cause) to an argument.
Contrast markers	To mark a contrast between two clauses or between two parts of the discourse, to show a contrast between an expected response or statement and the actual one.
Continuation markers	To show a continuation of discourse on the same topic, to add additional information in order to facilitate complete comprehension.
Elaboration markers	To elaborate, reformulate or exemplify.
Opening and closing markers	To signal the opening and closing of discourse or mark the end or beginning of a turn.
Sequencing markers	To show the temporal sequence between clauses or between two parts of the discourse, to structure events

Topic shift or digression markers	and ideas temporally. To signal shifts or transitions of discourse topics, to mark digression from one topic to another, or to return to a previous topic.
Summary or concluding markers	To indicate or preface results, summary, or conclusions.

2.2 The Functions of Discourse Markers

DMs can promote the coherence of the discourse and facilitate smooth communication (Ament *et al.*, 2019). In general, the functions of DMs can be categorized into two levels: the textual level and the interpersonal level. At the textual level, DMs are primarily used to connect the parts of an utterance to achieve discourse coherence, such as organizing discourse and encoding the text. At the interpersonal level, DMs are used to secure interpersonal relationships. In a discourse, DMs are considered to have pragmatic functions which help to make the text coherent and unified and to facilitate the comprehension of the discourse.

Writing is an important skill in language learning and it should be paid more attention to. A text cannot be referred to well-organized text without coherence and cohesion. Coherence refers to some kinds of relationship existing in the text and defining it as a text. To make a text coherent, contextual ties are very crucial elements. Halliday and Hanson (1976) defined a text as a sort of semantic unit. And they classified five cohesive devices: reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical cohesion, and conjunction. Halliday regarded conjunction as “discourse markers” to connect clauses, sentences and paragraphs. The more skillfully the DMs are used, the more coherent the text will be. EFL learners use DMs to make a text unity which helps to analyze the association within the text, so DMs become an inevitable part of the discourse coherence (Yang & Sun, 2012). It is apparent that EFL learners depend on and focus on the use of DMs to achieve discourse coherence. For example, previous studies have shown that the appropriate employment of DMs plays an important role in text coherence and cohesion (Liu & Braine, 2005). In particular, Bouveret and Carter-Thomas (2020) analyzed the use of French discourse marker *par ailleurs* (literally “by elsewhere”) in academic writing and found that the discourse marker they analyzed have a positive effect on the text management although the marker has no

mutually accepted and standardized translation in English. This research has complemented other studies which indicate the learners construct writing by the employment of DMs so as to achieve discourse coherence. For instance, Kate *et al.* (2011) found that the DMs signal the relation between the sentences contribute to the management of a coherent text. These findings reviewed above are also supported by Kleijn *et al.* (2019) who studied the effect of DMs across the text and they found that DMs can help readers create a coherent mental representation of the text.

Kim (1987: 12) supported that “Writing is cooperative in that writers desire for their intended readers to understand the message being sent”. So when EFL learners are writing they combine the sentences together to help readers comprehend a discourse. Previous studies have found that the presence of DMs promotes text comprehension by managing and constructing the text structure. For instance, Williams (1992) found that the absence of DMs makes the speech comprehensible and coherent to listeners. Therefore, he gave the result that the use of DMs affects the listeners’ comprehension. Furthermore, Flowerdew and Tauroza (1995) found that there is a closed relationship between the presence of DMs and second language lecture comprehension. They contrasted the result of comprehending the lecture by playing the videos. The control group watched the video with DMs such as so, right, well, OK, and now. While the experimental group watched the video without DMs. And they found that the learners in the control group comprehend the lecture better than the experimental group. Reza *et al.* (2010) indicated that the use of DMs promote correct interpretation. The studies reviewed above provide a point about the positive effect of the use of DMs.

2.3 Development of L2 Learners’ Use of Discourse Markers

Previous studies have shown that the prior knowledge of the use of DMs aids EFL learners to construct the text and make their text

understood by the readers (Kate & Nash, 2011; Wei, 2011). The knowledge concerns learners' ability and pragmatic competence to the appropriate use of DMs to manage or comprehend a text (House, 2013; Redeker, 2006).

In the field of second language acquisition, the use of DMs by native speakers and non-native speakers is usually explored. Previous studies gave the conclusion that the native speakers are more skilled in the employment of DMs than the non-native speakers who have low language proficiency level, lack of the language background, related knowledge, and other disadvantages (Ament *et al.*, 2018; Buysse, 2017; Liu, 2016; Pan, 2011; Wang & Wang, 2008). Ament *et al.* (2019) studied the effect of English-medium on the use of DMs and they contrasted the EFL learners' different lengths of time getting complete English-medium instruction with the English native speakers. They concluded the results that the English-medium instruction aids the acquisition of some kinds of DMs and facilitates a balanced use of DMs. The above literature review indicates that if EFL learners try to improve their pragmatic competence and ability, how to use DMs properly must be paid attention to. Romero-Trillo (2002) noted that the EFL learners will confront the risk of fossilization if they cannot make good use of DMs to achieve their intends.

A handful of studies explored the effect of language proficiency on the use of DMs. For example, Wei (2011) investigated the difference in the use of DMs by Chinese learners at different English proficiency levels and the results indicated that the proficiency level and context are related to the distribution of DMs. Thus, according to the previous research, there being a relationship between the language proficiency level and the use of DMs is presumed. Polat (2011) explored the acquisition of DMs by naturalistic language learners for one year and he showed the change or development of the use of DMs by the same group of people. His studies indicated that the possibility and feasibility of studying the DMs from developmental perspective. However, there are few studies to explore the relationship between the writing proficiency level and the use of DMs. As the DMs are also widely used in the written materials, so the study of the relationship between writing proficiency level and the use of DMs is also much necessary.

On the whole, the classification of DMs from Ament *et al.* (2018) is very specific. With the development of L2 learners' use of DMs, it is found that many factors can affect the use of DMs, among which language proficiency has been commonly investigated. Few studies, however, have investigated the use of DMs from a developmental perspective which needs to be further explored.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine Chinese EFL learners' use of DMs in L2 writings from a developmental perspective. Specifically, this thesis intends to answer the following two research questions:

- (1) What discourse markers do Chinese EFL learners use in their L2 writings?
- (2) Does the Chinese EFL learners' use of discourse markers vary across proficiency levels?

3.2 Participants

In the present study, the participants are 30 students of the same grade majoring in English from the Ocean University of China, one of the national key universities included in the list of "Double First-class" universities and formerly "Project 985" and "Project 211". The 30 participants studied English almost every day including getting formal English instruction, finishing homework, watching English movies, and so on because of the requirement of academic study and their interest. So participants' English acquisition includes tutored environment and untutored environment while the main way of learning occurs in the classroom. They acquire the target language in conscious and unconscious ways. And they are driven by pressure such as finishing the homework, passing the exams, winning the English written contest, or the need to communicate with native speakers. All of these push them to constantly use their extant linguistic systems and acquire new linguistic systems. After two years of formal and informal English instruction from sophomores to seniors in the university, the participants' English proficiency levels have developed. Results from the questionnaire reveal that every participant has passed TEM-4 when they were sophomores.

3.3 Instruments

Two instruments are used for this study in order

to gather the data: a questionnaire and two writing tasks. The questionnaire is used to explore participants' background information. Two writing tasks are chosen which are familiar to the participants, including "college stress" and "will AI make people be lazy to think". The participants finish the same two writing topics which are selected by the researcher when they are sophomores and seniors. The rationale for the writing topics is because these topics are closely related to the writing task in their exam.

The classification of the DMs proposed by Ament *et al.* (2018) is chosen because their taxonomy is produced based on the textual DMs and their classification is very comprehensive. They classify the DMs into eight categories (causal markers, contrast markers, continuation markers, elaboration markers, opening and closing markers, sequencing markers, topic shift or digression markers, summary or concluding markers).

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The study was conducted within 2 years. When the participants were preparing the TEM-4, they were given two topics to write the argumentative compositions. And two years later, when they were preparing the TEM-8, they were given the same two topics to write the same type of composition. After writing the composition each time, they did not receive any feedback to reduce the risk of the interference of the external and subjectivity and to increase the reliability of the study.

The researcher collected the writings together and established a corpus called OUCMW (the English major corpus in the Ocean University of China). The data in the corpus were labeled as S1, F1, S2, and F2 for the two writings of sophomores and seniors respectively. Then the researcher coded and tagged the DMs twice used in the writings in terms of the function the DMs carried to ensure accuracy. The DMs were examined in the context they occurred before and after them. The previous studies provided examples to analyze the data in this way. (Ament *et al.*, 2018; Redeker, 1990). The following excerpts are selected from the data to present the analyzing process.

Excerpt A. from one sophomore's writing about college stress:

Material: **Anyway**, academy is the main part of college and that is what college students should put in priority, just **like** working is prior in one's

life. **However**, there are many challenges for college students, **especially** for freshmen, including contents, studying mode and testing. Colleges are not to solidify the basic facts in students' minds **but** to cultivate their professional knowledge **and** skills, **hence** the contents are deeper **and** students' ability of self-teaching and research are highly demanded, which require students' all kinds of well-developed abilities.

Apart from academic stress, students also face financial problems. Some students from underprivileged families may encounter sneer from those born with a golden spoon **and** some of them even dress themselves regardless of their families' hardship. Students who always fail to live within budget are easily tempted by deceitful loans, **and thus** involve themselves in great troubles. **In other words, even though** the majority of college students have already reached the age of adults, they are just babies when dealing with finance.

Coding: The first word "anyway" indicates the opening of the argument and the beginning of the discourse. "Like", "such as", "especially" are the elaboration markers to take examples to support the argument. And "however", "but", "even though" indicate the contrast relationship with the sentence and clause before. "And" and "in other words" show the student to continue to argue their opinion and to add the information of the same topic and to show their deeper understandings. "Hence" and "thus" is the causal markers showing the result led by the preceding argument.

Excerpt B. from one sophomore's writing about artificial intelligence:

Material: **Above all**, history has vividly proved that machines make us physically lazy. In the past, we just moved around on foot, **whereas** now we always travel by cars, **and even** the more diligent of us just cycle. Our physical condition is becoming increasingly worse **due to** vehicles' developments. **Therefore**, we can well presume that the development of intelligent machines will cause the regression of our brains.

Besides, reality also shows that machines have already undermined our mental ability. **Thanks to** the development of computer, we can type, calculate **and** search for information conveniently. **Nevertheless**, in recent years, plenty of studies strongly indicate that the handwriting, calculation **and** memory of

encyclopedic knowledge of the new generation are all on decline. **Apparently**, if intelligent machines further advance and replace more of our mental work, our brains' ability is doomed to be weakened.

Finally, just as the article says, if intelligent machines develop to a stage where they can plan and organize, humans' struggle with them will reach an end, **for** they have a far more powerful 'brain' than us.

In summary, in a world run by intelligent machines, our brains will get lazy.

Coding: The writer uses three sequential markers "above all", "besides" and "finally" to present his opinion and make the writing in a clear structure. The instance of "whereas" functions to make a comparison with the preceding clause. "Even" and all remaining examples "and" is the instance to mark the

continuation of the opinion. "Due to", "therefore", "thanks to", "apparently" and "for" are used to indicate the causal relationship and to provide reasons or give results. "Just as the article says" is an opening marker to further argue his opinion. "In summary" is a concluding marker to summarize a segment of discourse.

After coding, the frequency of each category of DMs is calculated. Table 2 shows the total number of each discourse marker and the occurrence of different functions used in EFL learners' L2 writings. It finds that continuation markers (1293), causal markers (355), and contrast markers (276) are used highest frequency, followed by sequencing markers (245), elaboration markers (126), opening and closing markers (109), which are used moderately and summary or concluding markers (96), and topic shift or digression markers (29) being used the least frequently.

Table 2. Functions and Examples of Discourse Markers in the Data

Category	Example	Total number
Causal markers	So (98), because (38), therefore (34), and (32), thus (20), as a result (15), in order to (16), due to (13), since (10), as (9), because of (7), thanks to (7), in this/a way (7), as a/the consequence (7), for (5)...	355
Contrast markers	But (131), however (48), although/though (22), on the contrary (11), instead (13), even though/if (14), nevertheless (8), while (8), yet (4), in fact (3), in spite of (3), otherwise (3), in contrast (3), at the same time (1), and (1), despite (1), quite the contrary (1), whereas (1)...	276
Continuation markers	And (1098), or (41), not only...but also (16), what's more (13), in other words (10), besides (9), at the same time (8), even (6), after all (6), in addition (6), in fact (5), moreover (5), that is to say (5), furthermore (4), as a matter of fact (3)...	1293
Elaboration markers	Such as (35), for example (30), like (26), especially (16), for instance (18), particularly (1)...	126
Opening and closing markers	Nowadays (14), in my opinion (13), from/in my perspective (13), as far as I'm concerned (12), and (8), as we (all) know (5), when it comes to... (3), but (2), in this essay (2), so (3), according to (2), I believe (2), from where I stand (2)...	109
Sequencing markers	In addition (35), on the one hand (17), on the other hand (18), last but not least (17), secondly (17), first of all (16), first (11), besides (10), firstly (10), what's more (8), moreover (8), furthermore (7), finally (7), second (8), to begin with (7)...	245
Topic shift or digression markers	However (14), but (7), put aside the fact (2), from my perspective (1), so (1), in my opinion (1), according to (1), based on (1), while (1)...	29

Summary or concluding markers	In (a) conclusion (29), therefore (8), to sum up (8), in a/one word (9), to conclude (7), all in all (4), in short (3), so (3), above all (3), in my opinion (2), I think (2), accordingly (2), in summary (1), I believe (1), generally (1)...	96
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In conclusion, there are thirty participants from English major of the same grade in the study. By quantitative and qualitative approach, the findings show that the continuation markers are used the most, followed by causal markers, contrast markers, sequencing markers, elaboration markers, opening and closing markers, summary or concluding markers, and topic shift or digression markers.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Discourse Markers of Chinese EFL Learners in L2 Writings

The total number of DMs per 100 words and the number of types of DMs per 100 words are presented in Table 3. The table shows that the total words in the two writings are almost similar. In L2 writings of two topics, EFL learners use 19201 words in total when they are sophomores while they use 19083 words in total when they are senior students. The total words in their writings are related to the test requirement because they are asked to write no less than 300 and most learners finish their writings around 300 words.

The data further carries out the distribution of different DMs by analyzing the percentage of each category of DMs use per 100 words to answer the first question: What discourse markers do Chinese EFL learners use in their L2 writings? The distribution of DMs is explored and similarities are found in the distribution of different categories of DMs in two periods. As mentioned above, the writings in two periods both conclude eight categories of DMs, and the continuation marker (1293) are used the most frequently while topic shift or digression markers (29) are used least obviously frequently. The continuation markers are followed by causal markers (355), contrast markers (276) and sequence markers (245), elaboration markers (126), opening and closing markers (109), and summary or concluding markers (96). The results of the analysis of the distribution of different categories of DMs use present a similar pattern between the sophomore students and senior students considering the analysis above with continuation marker most and topic shift or

digression markers least.

Chart 1 The Distribution of Discourse Markers

To some extent, these findings are consistent with those of Liua and Braine (2005). Among their sub-categories of DMs, the continuation markers account for the largest proportion of use, followed by causal markers and contrast markers. They indicated that the continuation devices are used to connect phrases, clauses, and sentences and act as markers to provide more information such as “and”, “even” and “or” which is key to composing writing. The previous study (Liu, 2016) suggested that the continuation markers are the first and the easiest to study compared with other markers because continuation markers carry transparent meaning in the writings so they are used most frequently. Thus, EFL learners are more familiar with using continuation markers than other markers. Topic shift or digression markers are used significantly less than other markers regarding the genre of writing, i.e., argumentative composition. Argumentative writing has been considered as the hardest model by researchers, compared with other genres in both L1 and L2 writings (Yang & Sun, 2012). To finishing argumentative writing, the writers have to provide their argumentative points and support their points with explanations or examples. So topic shift or digression markers comparatively are less used in argumentative writing than other markers. Causal markers, contrast markers, and elaboration markers are used second, third and fifth most frequently indicating that the student is capable to support their viewpoints with reasons and conflicting statements. Sequencing markers, opening and closing markers, and summary or concluding markers are used by the students to improve the structure of essays. Regarding the distribution of DMs with the category, it is implied that students focus on using some DMs and are limited to use repeated DMs such “but” usually used to indicate the contrast relationship and “so” to indicate a causal relationship.

4.2 Variation in Chinese EFL Learners' Use of Discourse Markers Across Proficiency Levels

In addition, the data also present the total rate of each category of DMs use per 100 words (see Table 3) to answer the second question: Does the Chinese EFL learners' use of discourse markers vary across proficiency levels? It is found that the L2 writings written in the second college year conclude a slightly larger amount of DMs every 100 words compared with the fourth year. The paired-sample t-test comparing the DMs occurrence per 100 words between sophomores ($M = 6.33$, $SD = 1.49$) and seniors ($M = 6.35$, $SD = 1.47$) is insignificant, ($t = -0.67$, $p > 0.05$), suggesting a little discrepancy in the rate of DM use between them. In other words, the frequency

of DMs use of the students in two periods is alike. It also shows that the use of DMs does not rise with the improvement of proficiency levels. Specifically, the seniors use more continuation markers, elaboration markers, and topic shift or digression markers while fewer causal markers, contrast markers, sequencing markers, opening and closing markers, and summary or concluding markers than sophomores. But the differences are slight. The differences in the rate of DMs between the two periods are not obvious making it clear that the use of DMs between high proficiency levels learner and comparatively low proficiency levels is alike.

Table 3. Distribution of Discourse Markers in Two Writings

Stage	Sophomore	Senior
Total words	19201	19083
Mean no. of words	320	318
The no. of DMs	1295	1234
The no. of DMs per 100 words	6.74	6.48
The no. of causal markers per 100 words	1.03	0.83
The no. of contrast markers per 100 words	0.77	0.67
The no. of continuation markers per 100 words	3.31	3.44
The no. of elaboration markers per 100 words	0.29	0.37
The no. of opening and closing markers per 100 words	0.29	0.28
The no. of sequencing markers per 100 words	0.72	0.56
The no. of topic shift or digression markers per 100 words	0.06	0.09
The no. of summary or concluding markers per 100 words	0.28	0.22

Previous results indicated that the use of DMs between the sophomores and senior students present a similar pattern while this section shows that their variety of DMs use is much different.

The paired-samples t-test on DMs variety between sophomores ($M = 10.65$, $SD = 3.0$) and seniors ($M = 12.28$, $SD = 3.5$) is significant (t

$= 3.070$, $p < 0.05$). Table 4 presents the number of categories of DMs used by sophomores and senior students. All of them use a large variety of DMs and the seniors use DMs more variously than the sophomores. Besides, the sequencing markers that senior students use are apparently more various than the sophomores. In general, the fourth-year students make use of a larger variety of DMs, especially sequencing markers.

Table 4. The Number of Discourse Markers Variety

Category	Sophomore	Senior
Causal markers	44	39
Contrast markers	24	21
Continuation markers	44	49

Elaboration markers	10	9
Opening and closing markers	25	29
Sequencing markers	39	50
Topic shift or digression markers	8	7
Summary or concluding markers	28	27
Total number	222	231

As for the second question, similarities are found when making a comparison in the distribution and rate of DMs use between the sophomores and the seniors. In fact, there is a significant difference in the overall pattern of DMs. Additionally, the rate of different categories of DMs is also alike between the sophomores and senior students while the variety of each category of DMs presents a difference that the seniors use slightly more various DMs than the sophomores. Such change in the use of DMs might be due to the increasing English proficiency levels. The study investigated by Yang and Sun (2012) indicated that the higher proficient EFL learners compared with lower proficient EFL learners are more competent to use sophisticated words and sentences to promote variety and maturity of their writings. They found that with the improvement of language proficiency, EFL learners use less functional expressions but arrange their essays more appropriately. Besides, the EFL learners' lexical proficiency is consistent with their language proficiency, so the learners are capable of making use of varying expressions to achieve writing cohesion. Wei (2001) ever made a similar conclusion that the high proficiency EFL learners tend to incorporate more DMs into their speech to meet the need for communication. Previous studies also proved the consistent relationship between the range of use DMs and vocabulary acquisition (Daller *et al.*, 2003). They indicated the correlation between language proficiency and lexical sophistication by conducting language tests to measure vocabulary acquisition and examining lexical variation. The acquisition of vocabulary is similar to the acquisition of DMs indicating a dependence on the number of DMs use. Therefore, the present study also indicates the precious results that there is consistency between the language proficiency and the variety of DMs use.

An additional finding based on the present examination is that the variety of sequencing

markers used by the seniors is obviously more than the variety of sequencing markers used by the sophomores. Such results can be explained in terms of many factors. Firstly, the sequencing markers are closely related to the writing structures. The sequencing markers as global cohesive devices compared with causal markers, contrast markers, and other local cohesive devices are associated with high language proficiency and high writing quality. Thus, with the increase of language proficiency, Chinese EFL learners have acquired more sophisticated sequencing markers and more competent to arrange their structures with various sequencing markers to achieve their writing coherence and cohesion. Secondly, sequencing markers are highly important in argumentative writings to make the writing structure clear and facilitate the understanding and the teachers gave explicit instruction on the use of easy sequencing markers at the beginning such as "first", "second" and "in a word". And it is likely that the Chinese EFL learners got further explicit instruction to master more various sequencing markers. The last factor is that increasing comprehensive input contributing to the acquisition of sequencing markers which is also examined in the previous study (Buysse, 2015).

The previous research (Chiang, 2003; Yang & Sun, 2012) suggested that the frequency and variety of DMs play key roles in facilitating the quality of writings. The use of sub-categories of DMs are more closely related to the improvement of EFL proficiency and the accumulation of lexical knowledge. Compared with the second year, the writing ability of most higher proficiency learners may have developed to be comparatively stable which allows them to use the DMs systematically, thereby maintaining the cohesion and coherence of their writings and getting high scores.

On the whole, considering the fact that the EFL learners in the seniors have got two years the English learning in comparison with the sophomores. And the experiments are

conducted during they are preparing the TEM-8, so the EFL learners in the fourth year are at advanced proficiency level. Although the overall patterns of using DMs in the two periods are similar, the seniors use more various DMs than the sophomore in their writings. As a consequence, from a developmental perspective, the use of DMs in L2 writings is related to language proficiency levels.

5. Conclusion

The present study examines the feature of DMs used by Chinese EFL learners and the differences in the use of DMs by the same group of Chinese EFL learners. The study finds that Chinese EFL learners use continuation markers most frequently, which are followed by causal markers, contrast markers, sequencing markers, elaboration markers, opening and closing markers, summary or concluding markers, and topic shift or digression markers. The overall patterns of distribution and rate of DMs use in the two periods are similar, but there is a significant difference in the variety of DMs use. The seniors use more various DMs than the sophomores. The findings may supply evidence and contribute to the study of the correlation between the use of DMs and proficiency level. The study reveals that the use of DMs varies across proficiency levels in variety. High proficiency learners are more competent to use DMs and finish higher quality writings than low proficiency learners.

Many implications can be concluded from this study. Firstly, it is very important to use DMs appropriately and familiarly, so the English teachers have the responsibility to explain the meaning and importance of DMs and how to use them properly to improve students' awareness of using them. Due to the lack of information carried by the DMs, the teachers tend to ignore giving explicit instruction on the use of DMs. In addition, as mentioned above, the acquisition of vocabulary especially DMs plays an indispensable role in writings. The teaching in class is not enough for students to acquire such vocabularies. In order to further improve the students' ability to use DMs, effective exercises are necessary, such as reading, paraphrasing expressions after knowing what they mean, and making good use of synonyms or antonyms. Although the DMs involve many categories and are extensive, a problem that can be found in many Chinese EFL is that they use DMs repeatedly such as in TEM-4 and TEM-8

indicating the necessary of the instruction of DMs. Furthermore, because the input is closely related to output, writing exercises must be given much attention. In the present, with the improvement of proficiency and more writing exercise, the Chinese EFL learners show a development in the variety of DMs use. Therefore, reading should be integrated with writing. Last but not least, assessing criteria cannot be neglected in teaching. Different tests require different writing styles and ways so teachers should explain the requirement of the test accurately and teach the focuses accordingly. For example, in TEM-8, the students should support their opinions orderly, and then the sequencing markers are very important.

6. Limitations and Implications

However, there are limitations in the present study. The first is that the 30 participants seem to be small in size. The results would be more revealing if it studies a larger sample and a longer period. Secondly, the study is carried out according to two periods of Chinese EFL learners: the sophomores and the seniors. It would be interesting if the future study investigates more periods to better study development. Thirdly, the present study lacks the comparison with the native speakers, so it would be more accurate if the data of native speakers can be analyzed. Finally, during the process of coding, some errors of DMs use are identified while not analyzed in the present study, so the future study can further study errors of DMs in the Chinese EFL and provide some pedagogical implications.

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