

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **Introduction**

### **1.0 Overview**

This chapter is intended to set up the operational framework for this study and provide short background knowledge about the context of the study. It also discusses; the objectives, questions, and spells out some tentative hypotheses and a scope of facts expected to be achieved later in this study. Also this chapter provides the statement of the problem at the specified stages. Then, it shows what is the appropriate methodology should be used for data collection. And also, its concern about the real significance the study acts to give, what new knowledge it will add, and to what extent the EFL students and teachers can benefit from this study. Further, the chapter delimits the scope of the study.

### **1.1 The Context of the Study**

In the past twenty years or so, there has been an increasing interest in the theoretical studies of discourse markers, (DMs) focusing on what they are, what they mean, and what functions they manifest. Traditionally, some of the words or phrases that were considered discourse markers were treated as ‘fillers’, ‘expletives’ or ‘false beginners’; words or phrases that had no function at all. Schifrin, (1987) raised the importance of discourse markers in the 80s, and offered a coherence model which includes semantic, syntactic, and discourse-organizing level to investigate how discourse markers assist oral coherence.

Lynn and Zic (2004:117), claim that discourse markers are words or phrases that are relatively syntax-independent and do not change the meaning of the sentence, and have somewhat empty meaning. Whereas, Michael Swan (2005), explains that a discourse marker is “a word or expression which shows the connection between what is being said and the wider context”. For him, it is something that firstly, connects a sentence to what comes before or after and

secondly, indicates a speaker's attitude to what he is saying. He gives three examples: *on the other hand*; *frankly*; *as a matter of fact*. While, Chaudron and Richards, (1986) claim that discourse markers can be categorized into two types; macro and micro. Macro markers mean higher-order markers signaling major transitions and emphasis on discourse. Where, they are used to indicate a shifting of one topic to another topic, and to organize the discourse structurally. Meanwhile, micro markers are considered as lower-order markers of segmentations and inter-sentential connections. Where, they are fundamentally used as links to signal the internal or ideational relations within sentences so the relations of one clause to another clause or one sentence to another sentence are easier to comprehend.

In applied linguistics, many researchers see that, discourse markers have a positive role in classroom language, as effective conversational activities. Othman, (2010) and Flowerdew, (1994) claimed that, a conscious knowledge of the discourse genres and different syntactical elements can be aided in the process of comprehension of lectures. Accordingly, discourse markers as a part of the discourse genres may enhance and foster listening comprehension of the lectures in EFL contexts. So, why little attention has been paid to the use and functions of discourse markers as one essential factor in comprehending teacher-students conversation? In this respect, discourse markers may have an especially important role in terms of improving students' linguistics input and communicative competence, also establishing a comfortable context that will encourage students to engage more in listening comprehension of the discourse. Therefore, Siepmann (2005), defined discourse markers in a way which combine many aspects concerning discourse markers as facilitating signs. More explaining, Siepmann, (2005:43) states that;

*[...] discourse markers can be defined as linguistic expressions of varying length which carry pragmatic and/or propositional meaning, occur in both speech and writing, and facilitate rather than disrupt discourse.*

In the above quotation, there is no a certain aspect which is made obviously by discourse markers but it is generally addresses the function of facilitating the discourse. Therefore, the researcher argues that, this facilitation results from discourse markers can help students to enhance their listening comprehension of the lecturers' speech in EFL classes, which will be achieved later in this study after investigation.

According to Schiffrin (1987:49), it is important to EFL students understand discourse markers since they are part of the more general analysis of discourse coherence and how speakers and hearers integrate forms, meanings, and actions to make overall sense out of what is said. Therefore, the main objective of this study is however, to make students of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Sudanese tertiary level conscious to the effective role of DMs in enhancing listening comprehension in order to help them understand the content of the lecture. Thus, this study is conducted to find evidence to support the claim that the effectiveness of discourse markers can help in enhancing listening comprehension of spoken academic lectures in EFL classes.

Listening comprehension of spoken academic discourse such as lectures by EFL students is very significant skill in language learning; rather, it is students' ability to understand the meaning of the speech that they listen to; and also in acquiring knowledge and promoting of academic exchange. Furthermore, researchers, like Benson (1994), Dunkel (1991) and Flowerdew, (1994) have shown that effective listening comprehension skills are vital for students of ESL/EFL to achieve academic success. While the other language skills often receive direct instructional attention, lecturers usually expect

students” to develop their listening capabilities by osmosis and without help” (Mendelsohn, 1984, as cited in Oxford, 1993:205). Nevertheless, the nature of listening comprehension in such settings has received little attention among researchers, compared to the large amount of the studies that have been conducted in the area of written discourse and language reading comprehension. This study is therefore, a new addition in developing the nature of academic listening comprehension of lectures in EFL contexts; focusing on the significant role of discourse markers.

Graddol,(1999) his considerations invite reflections towards what extent spoken academic discourses particularly the lecture, as the central instructional activity among higher education and institutions can be affected and challenged. These ideas invite the researcher who is a lecturer at tertiary level to think about the significant role that the discourse markers play in enhancing listening comprehension of academic lectures in EFL classes. Therefore, academic discourse should be looked at as paramount for both students and lecturers. Students need to grasp the speech of the lecturers to take notes; meanwhile, lecturers do their best to clarify their speech to be understood. So, the interest of the present study focuses on two main variables which are the enhancing of listening comprehension of academic spoken lectures ( the dependent variable) and the effectiveness of spoken discourse markers ( the independent variable). Within the study of discourse markers the researcher is going to review some types of discourse markers “macro and micro” such as; (*you know, let’s begin, and, so, because, okay, well,*) that play a significant role in enhancing listening comprehension of lectures. This is the main point that the present study focuses on. Thus, the above mentioned reasons to the context of this study trigger the desire of the researcher to investigate such problem in an EFL situation.

## **1.2 The Study Problem**

This study has been proposed due to several reasons. The main reason of this study is whether EFL students at university level can benefit academically from explicit instruction and the interpretation of the lectures by means of discourse markers. More specifically, the position of the researcher as a lecturer in the Sudanese tertiary level has noticed that Sudanese students of EFL in (Karary University taken as an example) However, their awareness of listening comprehension in academic lectures is not developed to the extent that they can productively extract content information from academic lectures. Conway's review of various studies (1982, as cited in Oxford, 1993:206) shows that deficient listening skills were a stronger factor in college failure than were poor reading skills and poor academic aptitude. In this respect, the researcher claims that, EFL students are unaware of the significant role of discourse markers that play in enhancing listening comprehension of academic lectures. Another reason is that, EFL students sometimes fail to cope with the flow of the connected speech, this is due to the lack of knowledge of spoken discourse markers that facilitate understanding the content of subject. This phenomenon has affected negatively on students' listening comprehension of the spoken discourse in EFL classes. Consequently, this has bad effects on them in terms of; EFL students rarely take part in discussion or communicate in English effectively. Also, this really reflects their lack of listening comprehension skills in academic lectures. Furthermore, the ignorance of the importance of spoken discourse markers in English classes by EFL students affects negatively on their future careers particularly when they engage in communication with native speakers.

Moreover, the increasing involvement of researcher with EFL students' works has, however, indicated that much of their inability to comprehend spoken discourse and do not recall correctly the content of information is due to

the fact that, students tend to concentrate on the lexicogrammatical level of the oral presentation. In other words, they only listen to the words and concentrate on understanding the grammar of the language used, rather than focusing on the message conveyed by the speaker. In so doing, they miss important semantic cues which could enable them to assimilate or comprehend the content of the lecture. Field, (2004:365) claims that students focus their attention at word level much working memory capacity is occupied; thus preventing them from building words into higher-level meaning. A possible reason for this may be that, they are not made sufficiently aware of the listening skill in their first courses of language learning skills. The students, who are taken as a sample to the present study, appeared to be typically encountered this problematic. Hence, the researcher thinks that, this group of students (EFL students at Karary University) whose academic progress is endangered because they lack main skills which would ensure successful listening comprehension in academic lectures. Finally, due to the frequent use of discourse markers with no attention of their semantics and pragmatics values may affect negatively on their listening comprehension of any spoken discourse. Hence, this study attempts to investigate the effective role of discourse markers in enhancing university EFL students' listening comprehension.

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

The problem which aroused in this study has made the researcher to put the following objectives;

- a. This study aims to raise EFL students' awareness of the effective role of discourse markers in enhancing listening comprehension of the lectures.
- b. It aims to investigate the most effective categories of discourse markers that enhance EFL students' listening comprehension of academic lectures.

- c. This study aims to figure out and analyze the statistical difference in the pre- and post-test scores and then to determine whether the suggested treatment programme of discourse markers had benefitted EFL students' listening comprehension of academic lectures.

When investigating the above objectives about the role of discourse markers in enhancing listening comprehension of academic lectures by EFL students, the furthest objective is; to raise the awareness of EFL students and teachers of the significant role of discourse markers in their classes not only to enhance their listening comprehension but to use discourse markers in their oral communication and presentation.

#### **1.4 Questions of the Study**

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

- a. To what extent can EFL students enhance their listening comprehension of academic lectures if they are made aware of the effective role of spoken discourse markers?
- b. What categories of discourse markers that mostly enhance EFL students' listening comprehension of academic lectures in the treatment programme?
- c. Would there be a significant statistical difference between the pre-test and post-test scores suggesting that the treatment programme of discourse markers can benefit EFL students' listening comprehension of academic lectures?

#### **1.5 Hypotheses of the Study**

The study suggests the following hypotheses:

- a. EFL students can enhance their listening comprehension in academic lectures if they are made aware of the effective role of discourse markers.

- b. The macro and micro discourse markers categories are the most affecting types that can enhance EFL students' listening comprehension of academic lectures in the treatment programme.
- c. There would be a significant statistical difference in the pre-test and post-test scores suggesting that the treatment programme of discourse markers can benefit EFL students' listening comprehension of academic lectures.

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

The importance of this study is to contribute to the studies that are conducted in applied linguistics field, particularly in language listening comprehension in the hope of stressing the study problem at the specified stages. More clearly, the significance of this study at firstly, is to raise EFL students' awareness of the importance of discourse markers in listening comprehension however, in order to aid understanding the nature of academic spoken discourse in different levels of language learning. Secondly, it tests discourse markers' model in a new perception of language learning. Thirdly, the significance findings of this study will be generalized to be practiced in other foreign contexts. Finally, the study is expected to open new horizons for more studies in discourse markers, as a rich research area, to cover new and exciting dimensions in discourse markers as a site for investigation of language learning.

### **1.7 Methodology of the Study**

The researcher adopts the quantitative approach to determine whether the EFL students would gain a practical skill which they could employ to enhance their listening comprehension of academic lectures by means of discourse markers. In which the experimental and descriptive methods to this study firstly, allow the researcher, statistically compares the test performances of two groups of EFL students. The experimental group where it had been



introduced to a particular construct in treatment programme and the control group which had not. Secondly, it allows the researcher investigate teachers' attitudes towards the effectiveness of DMs in enhancing listening comprehension of the lectures.

The tools for data collection to this study are a test for EFL students and a questionnaire for university teaching staff through using the T. test and SPSS programme for data analysis. The source material for this study is a video-taped lecture was firstly shown to all the participants, including those in the control group. A pre-test, treatment programme, and post-test design were used. However, the data was collected, analyzed, and statistically processed. The two tests were used to compare the results of the experimental and control groups in the study. Furthermore, the questionnaire is constructed to reflect university teachers' attitudes on the role of discourse markers in enhancing listening comprehension of academic discourse in EFL classes.

### **1.8 Limits of the Study**

This study is restricted to investigate the effectiveness of discourse markers in enhancing listening comprehending of academic lectures in EFL classes at tertiary level. The study is limited to EFL students at Karary University (students of English language).Where the study limits as follows;

- a. Content: Discourse Markers & Listening Comprehension
- b. Place: Karary University
- c. Time: 2014 / 2017

### **1.9 Summary of the Chapter**

This chapter introduced an overview to this study and described the study problem in the specified setting. It has also, showed the methodology and significance of the study. The next chapter concerns the related literature review and the previous studies.