

The Effect of Spoken Discourse Markers on Improving Undergraduate EFL Students' Oral Fluency

Abdelrahim Elmahi Ahmed Abdelrahman- Food Industries Polytechnic, P. O. Box 52 | Al Kharj11942 | Saudi Arabia - Email: Abdelrahim.elmahi@yahoo.com, Tel: 00249912713103 | 00966537191252

Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the effect of spoken discourse markers on Sudanese undergraduate EFL students at Ahfad University, Sudan, to explore their role in enhancing students' learning of Spoken discourse marker to improve oral fluency. The study followed the descriptive inferential method, and employed a pretest and a posttest as a tool of data collection. The study sample is represented in 70 students (35 control group and 35 experimental group) who were randomly chosen. The data collected were the participants' tests scores. The collected data was analyzed by using Statistical Packages of Social Sciences (SPSS). The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference between control and experimental groups in the posttest scores, and that the means of experimental group are greater than that of control group in the posttest scores. The study concluded that spoken discourse markers improved EFL students' oral fluency. Suggestions for further studies were discussed at the end of the paper.

Keywords: Oral Fluency, Effectiveness Of Use Of Spoken Discourse Markers, Foreign Language Learning, University Student.

المستخلص

هدفت هذه الدراسة لبحث تأثير علامات الخطاب الشفوية في مهارة التحدث بطلاقة من قبل طالبات المستوى الثالث (لغة انجليزية) بجامعة الاحفاد للبنات لاستكشاف دورهن في تعزيز تعلم الطلاب لمهارة التحدث بالطلاقة. استخدم الباحث في هذه الدراسة المنهج الوصفي الاستنتاجي موظف الاختبار القبلي والبعدي كأداة لجمع البيانات الأولية. عينة الدراسة هي 70 طالبة تم اختيارهن عشوائياً 35 للعينة التجريبية و35 للعينة الضابطة وتمثلت البيانات في درجات الطالبات في الاختبارين القبلي والبعدي. تمت معالجة البيانات باستخدام الحزم الإحصائية للعلوم الاجتماعية (SPSS) وبطريقة تحليل المتغير المشترك وعلاقته بالمتغير المستقل. أثبتت النتائج وجود فرق إحصائي واضح بين المجموعتين فيما يخص الاختبار البعدي ووجود اختلاف كبير بين متوسط الدرجات بين المجموعتين فيما يخص الاختبار البعدي. توصلت الدراسة إلى نتيجة تأثير استخدام علامات الخطاب الشفوية في تطوير مهارة التحدث بطلاقة للطلاب الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية. تمت مناقشة التوصيات عند نهاية الورقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: طلاقة التحدث، تأثير استخدام علامات الخطاب الشفوية، طلاقة التحدث، تعلم لغة أجنبية، طالب جامعي.

Introduction

Oral fluency has been the focus of many studies, (Nation, 1989, 1991; Kormos and Denes, 2004), but the question remains unanswered: What is the stimulus of EFL

oral fluency? The focus of this study, as the topic suggests, is on investigating if spoken discourse markers can promote FL oral performance.



My interest in this topic sprung from the fact that I have always been a strong advocate for the various benefits of using spoken discourse markers on the basis of my own experience learning English as a second language. Guided by strong motivation to learn this beautiful language and be fluent in it, the researcher started using spoken discourse markers for his own sake and the researcher always thought that was one of the things that helped him has a 'better tongue' for the language and has an overall better performance, or fluency in English, his FL. Of course, it was not until his graduate school that the researcher realized that in order to claim or promote the benefits of this strategy to his FL students, who are in need of words of wisdom or good recipes on how to master a language, his testimony alone would unfortunately not suffice. Therefore, the researcher decided to start researching this topic of interest, in hope to find the support for his claims. the researcher discovered an abundance of literature that described the ways EFL learners can use to be fluent speakers, such as Perceptions of fluency (Dore, C. (2015).), but the researcher also identified an apparent gap in the literature on the effect of spoken discourse on the oral performance in FL. In other words, the effect of *spoken discourse markers* has so far not been investigated in terms of their influence on oral performance. When using spoken discourse markers, speakers benefit a lot, particularly in spontaneous speech. Crystal (1988) maintains that if used appropriately, discourse markers act as a lubricant to refine the interaction between speakers. It would appear that if

all spoken discourse markers are being practiced when speaking, speakers' development would eventually be reflected in FL oral performance. This is at least what the researcher thought that was experiencing as a FL learner who was using these markers in a non-immersive environment where English was only spoken in schools and there were not enough chances for speaking practice. In an immersive environment, where FL speakers are exposed to the language and they somehow 'soak in' the language through communicating with native speakers, their FL oral fluency commonly develops faster, but if FL learners do not have enough exposure to FL or enough speaking practice, the teaching approach should involve introducing and practicing various strategies that could promote the development of FL oral fluency. As a successful learner of English and currently an instructor of English as a Foreign Language, the researcher has constantly strived to find different ways to facilitate the learning process and offer tools which can help FL students to become independent learners and have the opportunity to do as much as they can to enhance their learning of a foreign language. The researcher has thus decided to review the existing literature on the effects of spoken discourse markers as a learning strategy and the documented works on what promotes FL oral fluency and conduct the current study in order to investigate the possible relationship between using these spoken discourse markers and the development of foreign language oral fluency.

Statement of the Problem: Speaking is a vital productive skill. Language learners need to produce language to improve and to show levels of proficiency. When they can not speak fluently, they are considered unsuccessful in mastering the language. Even though they have been studying English for many years, their English speaking may be still at the beginning level. This result is partly because of a focus on teaching grammar and lack of opportunity to practice speaking in English. They can speak English back and forth on basic topics; greetings or saying good bye because they practice these conversational English through drill and rote learning. Despite this reasonable amount of literature that described the benefits of using many strategies for the development of the oral fluency of EFL learners, there is an apparent gap in the literature on the effect of the spoken discourse markers on the oral fluency of Arab EFL learners .So, this study is designed to bridge this gap. This study will investigate the effect of spoken discourse markers on improving oral fluency of EFLLs.

The objective of the Study: The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of using spoken discourse markers in improving speaking fluency of EFL learners.

Research Question: Is there a difference in speaking test scores among EFLLs according to the treatment of learning spoken discourse markers and not learning spoken discourse markers?

Hypothesis :There is no difference in speaking test scores among EFLLs according to the treatment of learning

spoken discourse markers and not learning spoken discourse markers.

Literature Review

Strategies in Enhancing English Speaking: In the field of second language acquisition (SLA) research, fluency is a key term in language learning and oral skills, along with accuracy and complexity. Introduced by Skehan in the mid-nineties (1996), the three-dimensional model of complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) defines the terms individually. Complexity is understood as the capacity to use a variety of structures and vocabulary in the target language; accuracy is defined as being able to produce the second language (L2) without errors; and fluency is seen as “the ability to produce the L2 with native-like rapidity, pausing, hesitation, or reformulation” (Housen et al., 2012 p. 2). This CAF model has become a complement to more traditional proficiency standards, such as the four-skill model. Although it has been stated so far that the concept of fluency is multi-faceted and that it has a wide range of meanings, one common conception is that it is “the most silent marker(s) of proficiency in a second language” (Rossiter et al., 2010 p. 584). Studies mentioned above conclude that oral fluency is closely associated with features such as length, quantity of pauses, and fillers. In L2 teaching, oral fluency can be promoted by using linguistic features, such as formulaic sequences, and other pedagogical interventions, e.g., providing students with planning time before performing tasks.

Even though research, so far, has provided L2 teachers with a range of features shown to promote oral fluency, Gatbonton and Segalowitz (2005) state that “although one component of fluency is automatic, smooth and rapid language use, there are no provisions in current communicative language teaching methodologies to promote language use to a high level of mastery through repetitive practice” (p. 327).

Additionally, previous studies on L2 fluency teaching have also highlighted the impact L2 exposure outside the classroom can have on learners’ improvement (Lennon, 1990) and the benefits of interactions with native speakers (Ejzenberg, 2000). On this note, it has been suggested that when such interaction is not possible, oral fluency should be taught explicitly during lessons (Derwing et al., 2008). This idea is supported by de Jong and Perfetti (2011), who emphasize the idea that oral fluency only improves with continued practice.

Improvements in oral performance can be accomplished through techniques that theoretically affect the processes of fluency (de Jong & Perfetti, 2011). During recent decades, an increasing number of studies have analysed techniques and activities that can help students improve their L2 oral fluency.

Teaching students the right techniques to make the most of their time can help students make their learning process more independent. Crabbe (1993) suggests that materials used in L2 lessons could be strategy-training or awareness-raising activities. The former consists of teaching the student appropriate techniques to learn, whereas the latter implies making them notice the learning strategies used (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). In terms of awareness-raising, presenting examples to the students

(indirect awareness-raising) is usually used to promote fluency (Tavakoli et al., 2016). In this context, presented his “noticing hypothesis”, which establishes that noticing features of L2 input is essential to the learning process. In addition, he states that the role of attention is not only important in cognitive aspects of L2 development (Ellis, 1994), but it is also one of the key features in developing L2 fluency (Schmidt, 2001 p.8). Badawi (2019) claimed that University teachers use mother tongue more than the foreign language, students do not participate in oral communication due to psychological problems such as shyness and lack of self-confidence also teaching methodology not appropriate enough to encourage students to get engaged in oral communication. Therefore, teachers can focus learners’ attention on features that influence the perceptions of fluency, such as fillers and pauses. Once students have been made aware of these features and they have acquired the right learning strategies, they require opportunities to practice in context (Rossiter et al., 2010).

Task type is not the only factor that can reinforce students’ oral fluency. Ejzenberg (1992) states that the teaching-learning context is also important for the learner’s progress. He studied Brazilian EFL learners to investigate the role of context in the production of fluency.

The students were given different tasks with different levels of interaction (i.e., monologue, dialogue), and task structures (i.e., controlled, step-by-step instructions). The results show that learners are perceived to be more fluent when they engage in interaction with an interlocutor, especially when the interlocutor provides hints to help the learner follow the conversation (Ejzenberg, 2000).

Diepenbroek and Derwing's research (2013) also makes this issue visible. They studied pragmatic and fluency content in 48 EFL textbooks from different language levels, also in Canada. Their results show that most textbooks have less than ten activities that would truly promote fluency, and some of them had only one or even none.

Strategy training and Awareness-raising activities: Both language teachers and learners use strategies in teaching and learning the language. Most of the strategies used and suggested for teachers focus on providing opportunities to the learners to speak through activities in the classroom. Linguistics and ESL/EFL teachers agree that students learn to speak in the second or foreign language by interacting. There are many techniques to provide opportunities for interaction applied in teaching and learning English speaking skill, for example, discussion, role play, simulation, information gap, brainstorming, storytelling, interviews, games, jokes, and song.

Method of the Study

The researcher used a quantitative method in this study; an experimental, randomized pretest-posttest control group design and the pre- and posttest used to compare the two sets of speaking scores. Comparative pre-and post-speaking scores analysis conducted to check learner English speaking proficiency gains. The purpose of the pre speaking test is to establish beginning base-line English speaking proficiency scores for all participating EFLs. Post speaking scores was used to check if there are speaking proficiency gains as a result of learning spoken discourse markers.

Tools of Data Collection

The researcher used speaking test to test the oral fluency of the two groups. The test consists of a group of topics (three topics). The test scores rate from 1 to 5 they are (1 is poor; 2 Fair ; 3 Adequate ; 4 Good ; and 5 Excellent).

Sample of the Study

70 of undergraduate EFL students at a private university in Sudan participated in this study .The participants were second - year ESP students who enrolled in the course of oral presentation, including spoken discourse markers. All of the participants had received a formal English speaking course instruction for at least two years. The participants were Sudanese EFL students in a private university who have learned English as a foreign language.

Procedures of Data Collection

The researcher designed a test to collect the needed data. The test consists of a group of topics which were used to test the participants' actual knowledge and performance in using spoken discourse markers. The subjects were required to record an oral presentation carefully and then shared it with the researcher.

Reliability of the Tools

The test had been used is in accordance with Common European Framework of Languages.

Validity of the Tools

Before being administered, the instrument had been checked and revised by some experts, particularly associate professors of teaching English as a foreign language. They gave valuable advice which made it valid. The subjects were asked to do the tasks without giving much attention to the purpose of the test; in other words, they performed spontaneously. The experiment was done as directed.

Data Analysis
Analysis of the Students' Pre and Post tests

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects					
Dependent Variable: Pretest Score					
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	41.657 ^a	1	41.657	66.361	.000
Intercept	729.657	1	729.657	1162.372	.000
group	41.657	1	41.657	66.361	.000
Error	42.686	68	.628		
Total	814.000	70			
Corrected Total	84.343	69			

a. R Squared = .494 (Adjusted R Squared = .486)

The subjects of this research were given two tests that covers a variety of tasks. These tasks were divided into two main parts. The first part is pretest and the second one is posttest. The task is a presentation of participants' choices from a set topics. The participants' tests scores per group were analyzed by using SPSS.

Table (1) The test of between control and experimental groups of pretest

Table (1) above shows the effect of pretest on both groups . As we can see there significant difference between groups in terms of pretest.(.000)is significant. Therefore One-way ANCOVA was conducted to control for the other factors.

Table (2) Homogeny of regression condition test

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects					
Dependent Variable: Posttest Score					
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	82.028 ^a	3	27.343	93.776	.000
Intercept	12.037	1	12.037	41.283	.000
group	11.721	1	11.721	40.201	.000
pretest	16.246	1	16.246	55.718	.000
group * pretest	6.144	1	6.144	21.073	.232
Error	19.244	66	.292		
Total	987.000	70			
Corrected Total	101.271	69			

a. R Squared = .810 (Adjusted R Squared = .801)

Table (2) above shows the homogeneity of regression test . As we can see there is no significant difference between groups in terms of homogeneity of (.232) is insignificant.

Table (3) Descriptive statistics of control and experimental groups of the posttest

Descriptive Statistics			
Dependent Variable: Posttest Score			
Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
control	2.60	.847	35
experimental	4.51	.612	35
Total	3.56	1.211	70

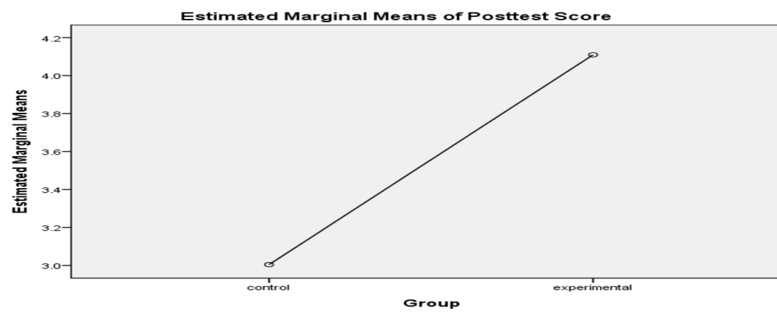
Table (3) shows the descriptive statistics of the two groups in terms of posttest. As we can see, there is a difference between control and experimental groups means and standard deviations in terms of post test scores. The mean for control group is 2.60 whereas the mean for experimental group is 4,51. The standard deviation of the control group is .847 whereas the standard deviation of the experimental group is .612.

Table (4) Tests of Between-Subjects Effects in terms of posttest

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects						
Dependent Variable: Posttest Score						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	75.883 ^a	2	37.942	100.129	.000	.749
Intercept	13.426	1	13.426	35.432	.000	.346
pretest	11.755	1	11.755	31.021	.000	.316
group	10.807	1	10.807	28.521	.000	.299
Error	25.388	67	.379			
Total	987.000	70				
Corrected Total	101.271	69				

a. R Squared = .749 (Adjusted R Squared = .742)

Table (4) above shows tests of between control and experimental effects in terms of posttest. As we can see, there is a significant difference between control and experimental groups in terms of posttest scores (.000) is significant. In addition, the effect size for posttest is 29.9 %.



Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Pretest Score = 3.23

Figure 1 Estimated Marginal Means of Posttest Score

Discussions and Results

As we can see from tables (3), (4), and figure one, spoken discourse markers have a clear positive impact on EFL learners' oral fluency. From table three which is about descriptive statistics, there is a big difference between control and experimental groups' means. These means are 2.60 and 4.51. From table four, we can see that there is a statistic significant difference between the control and experimental groups. Also, figure one supports the above mentioned results.

Discussion on Future Directions of the Research Paper

1. Effects of spoken discourse markers on the improvement of some other elements in speaking, for example, grammar, vocabulary, should be investigated.
2. A study of using spoken discourse markers to improve oral fluency that investigates the different levels of improvement of oral fluency should be carried.
3. Effects of argumentative spoken discourse markers in improving EFL debate skills.

Conclusion

The aim of the current study was to investigate the effect of spoken discourse markers on improving English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' oral

fluency. Based on the data analysis and discussion, it was found that spoken discourse markers have positively affected EFL learners' oral fluency. Being able to communicate more effectively and more fluently in the target language is always a main purpose in learning that particular language. The finding of this study has enriched the body of knowledge in teaching and learning English as a foreign language. However, there is much more to investigate to make language education more effective and successful.

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