

Investigating the Role of Spoken Discourse Markers in Enhancing Oral Fluency, from EFL Students' Perception

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Abstract

his study aimed at investigating undergraduate EFL students' perceptions about the role of spoken discourse markers in enhancing oral fluency in terms of difficulty, effectiveness and motivation. The study followed the descriptive method, and employed a questionnaire as a tool of data collection. The study sample is represented in 35 students. The data collected was analyzed by using Statistical Packages of Social Sciences (SPSS). The study concluded that spoken discourse markers enhanced the learning of oral fluency, however they were not easy to use, but they were effective and increased students' motivation in enhancing oral fluency. Suggestions for further studies were discussed at the end of the paper.

Keywords: Oral Fluency, Effectiveness, Use Of Spoken Discourse Markers, Foreign Language Learning, University Student. Write words not sentences

المستخلص

هدفت هذه الدراسة بحث مدى استيعاب الطلاب لدور علامات الخطاب الشفوية في تطوير مهارة التحدث بطلاقة من حيث التأثير، الصعوبة وزيادة الدافعية لدارسات اللغة إنجليزية لغة أجنبية بجامعة الأحفاد للبنات. تم استخدام المنهج الوصفي التحليلي مع توظيف الإستبيان كأداة لجمع البيانات الأولية. عينة الدراسة هي 35 طالبة. تم مشاركة الإستبيان مع المجموعة عبر شبكة الانترنت وتمت معالجة البيانات بواسطة الكمبيوتر باستخدام الحزم الإحصائية للعلوم الاجتماعية (SPSS). توصلت الدراسة لمجموعة من النتائج أهمها الاتفاق علي تأثير استخدام علامات الخطاب الشفوية في تطوير مهارة التحدث بطلاقة واستيعاب الطلاب لعلامات الخطاب، وزيادة الدافعية لديهم. تمت مناقشة التوصيات عند نهاية الورقة.

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

Introduction

different approaches in the field of second language acquisition and it is given many definitions and characteristics. Its importance foundations. They already know grammar commonly recognized and associated with mastery structures, vocabulary, and they are able to write or proficiency of the language and it is a part of short phrases and paragraphs, but at the moment to the criteria for many language assessment tests, speak, they do not seem to have developed good one clear example being the language fluency in speaking, even after studying English examinations based on The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), make communication unsuccessful because of not such as IELTS. Although its importance is using spoken discourse markers, as one reason already known, fluency is believed to have been Fluency is one of the main goals for any language ignored in English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. The acquisition of this skill studied from classrooms (Rossiter et al., 2010).

However, oral fluency has been focus of many studies, (Nation, 1989, 1991; Kormos and Denes, 2004), but the question remains unanswered: What is the stimulus of EFL oral fluency? Focus of this study, as the topic suggests the evaluation of using spoken discourse markers to promote FL oral performance. There is an abundance of literature that described the ways EFL learners can use to be fluent speakers, such as the use of fluency development techniques (Masuram, J., & Sripada, P. N. (2020), through explicit instruction of face threatening strategies (Biria, R., Pozveh, S. M. H., & Rajabi, B.), the role of teachers and text books (Morrison, 2018) ,impact of pre-speaking activities on intermediate EFL learners' oral performance (Dabiri et al.2019), but I 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. The researcher has 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 evaluate the effects of using these spoken discourse markers on 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 focus on teaching grammar and lack of opportunity to practice speaking 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. Therefore, oral fluency has been the focus of many studies (Nation, 1989, 1991;) but the problem remains unsolved. However, more studies about how to tackle this problem have been carried out using a variety of strategies (de Jong, Nel & Charles Perfetti. 2011; Dabiri et al.2019). Despite this reasonable amount of literature that described the benefits of using many strategies develop 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.

Objective of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine EFL learners' perceptions on using spoken discourse markers in improving speaking fluency.

Research Question

To what extent do spoken discourse markers improve speaking fluency in terms of difficulty, effectiveness and motivation?

Hypothesis

Learning spoken discourse markers to improve speaking fluency is not difficult, not effectiveness and not motivation.

Literature Review

Speech fluency can be studied from the speaker's perspective by looking at the psycholinguistic aspect of speech, or from the listener's perspective by focusing on the perception he or she has of how smoothly and naturally the message is delivered (Ejzenberg, 2000).



Fluency is often associated with notions of smoothness, fluidity, and rapidity (Koponen & Riggenbach, 2000). In addition, fluency has been commonly viewed as a demonstration of an acquired skill in a foreign or a second language.

Furthermore, Pawley and Syder (1983) distinguish between two types of speaking fluency: “nativelike [sic] selection” and “nativelike delivery.” “Nativelike selection” is the ability of a second language learner to accurately produce utterances with vocabulary and phrases that a native speaker would use. Lennon (2000) refers to it as a higher order of fluency, or overall oral proficiency. On the other hand, “nativelike delivery” is the ability to produce speech as smoothly and effortlessly as a native speaker. Similar in definition to “native like delivery” is the lower order of fluency that can be measured through assessing the following characteristics: speech rate, length of pauses, hesitations, restarts, stretches of speech, intonation patterns, and stress-timed delivery (Oppenheim, 2000; Lennon, 2000).

Finally, Riggenbach, (2000, p.283) defined it as a “flow, continuity, automaticity, or smoothness of speech”. Not only has the definition of oral fluency been presenting a controversial issue, but its measurement has as well. Perceived fluency is a combination of cognitive, utterance fluency and the listener’s perception of the utterance. Put simply, perceived fluency is the judgment the listener makes about the speaker based on the impression made by their utterance. In this scenario, the speaker’s performance is a result of his/her cognitive fluency, and perceived fluency is “the inference that listeners make about the connection between utterance and cognitive fluency” (Segalowitz, 2010 p. 49). As

Lennon (1990) points out, “fluency reflects the speaker’s ability to focus the listener’s attention on his/her message by presenting a finished product, rather than inviting the listener to focus on the working of the production mechanisms” (pp. 391-392).

In language assessment, fluency has been measurable criteria since the 1950s (Koponen & Riggenbach, 2000). In test descriptors, fluency is commonly associated with the idea of “smoothness” of speech, and as part of a series of proficiency levels that categorizes learners. (Snow and Dolbear in 1989) , assertively note that although language fluency should be assessed based on different criteria, language testing is evolving into “providing single global ratings of proficiency based on a composite impression in which accuracy, accent and communicative efficiency are subsumed” (Lennon, 1990 p. 398). Nowadays, when evaluating oral performance, most exams focus on fluency in a narrow sense, as Lennon presented. Some of the most common standardized tests used to measure English proficiency are the Cambridge English Language Assessment exams, such as Cambridge English: Preliminary (PET); Cambridge English: First (FCE); Cambridge English: Advanced (CAE) and Cambridge English: Proficiency (CPE); and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), used to measure English proficiency for non-native speakers for academic purposes in English speaking countries, as well for immigration purposes. These exams base their marks on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which provides the common background for European countries for the preparation of documents such as syllabi, curricula, textbooks, and exams.

The CEFR provides European institutions with a framework to “define levels of proficiency which allow learners’ progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis” (Council of Europe, 2001 p.1), with the objective of creating a more equal system for learning and teaching modern languages. Even though the CEFR document acknowledges the fact that communication depends on human factors that differ from person to person, and that teachers and students should work on reintegrating “the many parts into a healthily developing whole”, the framework presents written criteria often used in standardized tests, and which therefore cannot be accommodated individually. In order to achieve its intended purposes, the Common European Framework states the document must be “comprehensive”. That is, it should try to cover as much language knowledge and skills as possible, acknowledging that trying to cover all scenarios of language use will not be possible; it should also be “transparent” providing clear information understandable to everyone; and finally, it should be “coherent”, providing descriptions free of contradictions, balancing the objectives, contents, and teaching testing methods according to the different educational contexts.

Although CEFR was created as a “common ground” for European nations, it is widely used across other continents and its proficiency levels have been adapted to be used in other contexts. In the case of the Chilean educational context, CEFR levels are commonly used as evidence of proficiency levels, not only by universities and language institutions, but also in its

national curriculum for the subject of English as a foreign language and regulation for teacher training qualifications.

In terms of perceptions, many studies have considered listeners’ perceptions of fluency (Lennon, 1990; Towell et al., 1996; de Jong et al., 2009). Surprisingly, it appears that most listeners who participate in these studies agree on their rating results. However, the majority of the participants are not experts in language teaching. There appears to be a lack of research which focuses on teachers’ perceptions and understanding of fluency, and how they understand fluency to affect their teaching practices. Some studies using teachers as raters of fluency are Kormos and Denes (2004) and Dore (2015).

Method of the Study

The researcher designed a questionnaire to collect the needed data. The questionnaire consists of a group of sentences which were used to test the participants’ actual knowledge and performance in using spoken discourse markers. The subjects were required to read the sentences carefully and then respond by using Google Form.

Tools of Data Collection

First the researcher explained to the participants the procedures, using Google Form and how they can respond to such questionnaire then he shared the link with the participants, and they were required to read the whole sentences thoroughly before answering them. The reading of the sentences and responding process took about 45 minutes.

Sample of the Study

There were thirty-five of undergraduate EFL students at a private university in Sudan participated in this study. The participants studied were second -year English E.S.P 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 for at least two years.

Procedures of Data Collection

The questionnaire was designed to collect the data for this study. It was used and the participant were required to choose from the options (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree).

Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected from the responses task was analyzed by using the

Table (1) Subscales, Numbers of Items, Item Number

Subscales	Numbers of Items	Item number
Difficulty	8	1, 2, 6, 10, 12, 15,17, 23
Effectiveness	10	5, 7, 9, 13, 14, 18, 20, 21,22, 24
Motivation	6	3, 4, 8, 11,16, 19
Total	24	

Table one shows the subscales, number of items, and each item number. As we can see there are eight items in the area of difficulty, ten items in the area of effectiveness, and six in the area of motivation.

Table (2)

Questionnaire Score Interpretation

	Scale		
	Difficulty	Effectiveness	Motivation
2.74	easy	ineffective	demotivating
5.00	difficult	effective	motivating

Table two shows the scale of how to interpret the items of the questionnaire by using means and standard deviations. As it shows, if the items lie between 1.00 and 2.74 they are said to be easy, ineffective, and demotivating. If they lie between 2.75 and 5.00 then they are considered difficult, effective and motivating

Table (3) Means and Standard Deviations of the Difficulty of Using Spoken Discourse Markers

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.Spoken discourse markers are difficult to practice	2.68	1.156
2.Spoken discourse markers help me to acquire greater skills to speak English	4.05	.911
6.Using spoken discourse markers is hard for me	3.03	1.236
10.I have to put much effort to practice using spoken discourse markers	3.49	1.096
12.I had trouble to use spoken discourse markers	3.00	1.179
15.Spoken discourse markers are demanding	3.46	.931
17.I feel ill at ease to use spoken discourse markers	3.24	1.256
23.Practicing spoken discourse markers requires too much time	2.97	1.118

Table three shows the means and standard deviation of the difficulty of practicing spoken discourse markers.

Table (4) Means and Standard Deviation of The Effectiveness of using Spoken Discourse Markers

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
5.Using spoken discourse markers is hard for me	3.97	1.066
7.I can say some English expressions better after I practice spoken discourse markers	3.89	.882
9.I feel more confident to speak English after I practice spoken discourse markers	3.59	.986
13. I speak English better after practicing spoken discourse markers	4.00	.799
14.I am satisfied with how much I improved my Speaking ability from spoken discourse markers	4.03	.875
18. I speak English clearer after I practice using spoken discourse markers	3.84	.897
20.I have become more competent in presenting presentations in English due to spoken discourse markers	4.03	.928
21.Spoken discourse markers encourage me to speak English when I am afraid of being awkward	4.00	.918
22.Spoken discourse markers are worth practicing	3.86	1.168
24.Spoken discourse markers improved my presentations ability	3.57	.816

Table four shows the means and standard deviation of effectiveness of using spoken Discourse markers to improve oral fluency.

Table (5) The Motivation of Using Spoken Discourse Markers

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
3.Spoken discourse markers enable me to expose to a variety of functions of signpost words	3.84	.898
4.I can say some difficult English speeches after I practice using spoken discourse markers	3.97	.799
8.Spoken discourse markers help me to say unfamiliar English expressions	3.89	.906
11.Spoken discourse markers help me to broaden my speaking knowledge	3.92	.829
16.Spoken discourse markers help me to learn new things	3.78	.854
19.Spoken discourse markers enable me to present presentations in English	3.97	.833

Table five shows the means and standard deviation of motivation of using spoken discourse markers to improve oral fluency.

Discussions and Results

As we can see from table (3), statements one and twenty three prove that spoken discourse markers are easy to practice but require too much time to practice. This is evidenced in the means of the two statements. The means are 2.68 and 2.97. The rest of the statements prove the difficulty of practicing spoken discourse markers. Their means are 4.05, 3.03, 3.49, 3.00, 3.46, 3.24, 2.97.

As we can see from table (4), almost all of the statements support the fact that spoken discourse markers are effective. This is shown in the means of all the statements. The means are 3.97, 3.89, 3.59, 4.00, 4.03, 3.84, 4.03, 4.00, and 3.86 3.57.

As we can see from table (5), almost all of the statements support the fact that spoken discourse markers are motivating. This is shown in the means of all the statements. The means are 3.84, 3.97, 3.89, 3.92, 3.78, and 3.97.

Conclusion

The aim of the current study was to investigate English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' perceptions towards the role of spoken discourse markers in enhancing oral fluency in terms of difficulty, effectiveness, and motivation. Spoken discourse markers may seem easy to practice, however it is not practically like that. They are difficult to practice. In addition, they are effective and motivating in enhancing 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.

Suggestions for Further Studies

1. Spoken discourse markers to improve oral fluency of EFL learners with longer periods of practice, or no limitation of time should be examined to investigate the levels of oral fluency improvement.
2. Using electronic devices to help in practicing spoken discourse markers.

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